

THE  
**ANUAN  
MISSION**

BOOK 2  
OF THE ANUAN LEGACY SERIES

TRACI ISON SCHAFER

Advanced Reader Copy

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The Anuan Mission  
Book 2 of The Anuan Legacy Series  
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Editor: Christina Consolino, [www.christinaconsolino.com](http://www.christinaconsolino.com)

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**DEDICATED TO MY FAMILY.**

*Thank you for your love and support.*

§

To my grandsons,

**Ison Rhys & Atlas Rhain,**

I leave you this legacy.

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# 1 - VICTORIA

Gaige and I stood in front of the space-view window looking out over the planet, Anu, as the ship approached. Our side of Mission Earth faced the planet—Daigon’s touch for my sake, I suspected. A skillful captain, he was also a thoughtful father-in-law.

The planet grew larger, and I tried to imagine what my life would soon become. Gaige had told me that Anu and Earth were very similar. That’s why they used Earth as an outpost millennia ago—a decision that would mean the beginning of the human race on Earth. Gaige was, so far, right. Swirls of white smeared the blue and green planet, and I felt as if I’d stepped back in time to the day I watched a similar scene. It wasn’t Anu then but Earth, the planet I’d known as home, slipping into my past, growing ever smaller until it disappeared completely. I shut my eyes, pushing thoughts of Earth away. I already loved the Anuan people—*my* people, *my* family—and I knew I’d love my new home just as much.

Gaige’s large, warm hand squeezed my own. “Doing okay?”

I opened my eyes, and the blue-green ball had grown noticeably larger in those few seconds I’d withdrawn into myself. Yes, Anu and Earth looked so much alike. I’d soon find out how much more the two planets had in common. And how much they didn’t.

“Victoria?” Gaige said.

“Oh, I’m sorry. I’m okay. Just deep in thought.”

“I know. Feel better making sure, though.” Gaige was quiet for a moment. “I’ve known a universe full of other people my whole life. I can’t imagine what it would be like to only find out now.”

My body shifted forward like I’d decelerated at a stop light.

Gaige squeezed my hand again, leaned down close to my ear, and spoke quietly. “That movement is normal. Dad’s been reducing speed since before we reached our solar system. It’s still noticeable when we enter the atmosphere, though. The friction puts a drag on the ship. The atmosphere can distort the view, too, especially when we’re plowing through it.”

The view cleared after a moment, and my body shifted backward and relaxed, feeling no more forces from velocity changes. Distance and spotty clouds still left the surface of the planet to my imagination. My head swam, and I put my free hand against the window to steady myself.

Gaige let go of my hand and put his arm around my back. “You’re still sure you don’t want to do this in sickbay?”

“I’m positive. I don’t want to spend my first moments on my mother’s—*my*—planet lying in a hospital bed. I’m fine. Nothing overwhelming. Just noticeable.” I removed my hand from the window and leaned against Gaige instead. “I can feel the people here. Have been feeling them for a while. But the sensation is really strong now.” The emotions of an entire planet full of people rippled through my body, making my nerves twitch and my heart race. But I knew what to do with those errant emotions now. Not like when I’d first been exposed to the Anuans on this ship. I breathed . . . deep . . . slow . . . even. I reached out to the universe. The smallness of the individuals whose emotions encroached



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unknowingly upon me faded into the vast peace of the whole until only my own emotions were left. My body relaxed some, gripped purely by coiled excitement now.

“Perfect,” Gaige whispered. “You’re doing well.”

“I told you I didn’t need sickbay.” I smiled up at him. He smiled back and kissed me on the forehead. A color change in my peripheral vision caught my attention. I turned back to the window. We’d broken through the fluffy clouds, and the surface of Anu spread out before my eyes.

The ship was heading for a huge landing pad surrounded by a few, small buildings some distance from the pad. To the right of the complex, a vast field full of golds and reds and purples continued for some distance until it was overtaken by a forest that curved out of sight over the horizon.

The left side of the landing site touched the edge of a massive city that paralleled a coastline beyond it for miles. The sun hung low over the ocean waters, lighting its surface with ripples of reds and oranges. The same sunset beauty reflected off the glass and silver buildings in the city. Green spaces, fields of wildflowers, and smaller homes sat interspersed among the sunlit structures like several cities and suburbs had melted together with no beginnings and no ends.

“It’s . . .” A lump caught in my throat. I swallowed it down, “beautiful.”

My body shifted as if I were in an elevator—not the smooth pressure-driven kind of elevators the Anuans called an ibbs but a clunky, earth elevator when it reached the lobby of a building. The ship had landed. And I was home.

I stood silent, hardly able to believe that after months of space travel, we were finally there. “Can we exit yet?”

“They should be opening the doors now. You’ve already acclimated to the gravity and seem to be doing okay with your exposure to more Anuan people. With all the medical accessories in your clothing, Zada would have notified us about any problems. So, yes, we can leave the ship whenever you feel ready.”

“I’m ready!” My body could hardly contain my surging adrenaline. “I can’t believe all this is really happening.” I inhaled deeply, trying to slow my racing heart, and took the first step toward my new world.

Gaige and I entered the ibbs and descended to the debarking area near the bottom of the ship. When the door of the ibbs opened, nothing stood between me and the view of my new planet. The entire outer side of the room lay open with dozens of people proceeding down the ramp that ran the length of the exit. Though active, it lacked the feel of the mass exodus I’d expected.

Still looking toward the opening on the far side, I stepped into the room. “I thought this place would be packed with people.”

“It’ll be dark soon. Some will wait until morning. Some live on the ship, whether we’re on a mission or docked. They’ll venture out to visit and shop when the mood strikes them. I—we—have a place at the beach too. After you see the surface, you can decide if you want to go there or stay in our quarters on the ship.”

I moved to the edge of the opening and stopped. Straight ahead, the flora in the expansive field rustled slightly in the breeze, and to my left, the city lay silhouetted in the brilliant sunset. “I think I’d like to stay on the surface.” I walked down the ramp, stopped once more at the bottom, and looked at my feet, firmly planted on the ramp only inches away from the planet’s surface. “I can’t believe I’m about to step foot onto another planet.”

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“Whenever you’re ready,” Gaige said.

“Here goes.” I lifted my foot and set it down on my new home planet. Then the other foot. Another step and another until my feet left the dock area and settled on blue-green *grass*. Still under the looming shadow of the ship, I dropped to my knees and spread my hands across the fragrant ground covering. I breathed the aroma in, sweet and fresh. “It’s asper. Just like in the ship’s park.”

Gaige squatted next to me. “That’s right. It is asper. It makes a good, strong surface covering for the launch area.”

Without thinking, I spread myself out on the ground, laid my cheek against the asper, and closed my eyes. The vibration of the planet’s energy resonated throughout my body. “I really am home. I can feel it.”

Gaige sat down beside me and placed his hand on my back. “Yes, you are. Finally. Welcome home.”

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“I feel like I could take on the world here!” I raised my hands higher, and the plate followed, now hovering about five feet above the bed. “This place is so energizing!” I’d been up since before dawn working on my telekinetic exercises. The sun had finally begun to fill our beachside quarters, and the light emitting from the walls had gradually dimmed and gone off.

Gaige eyed the floating plate from the other side of the room. “Do two now.”

I held my left hand toward the floating plate and aimed my right toward another, still lying on the bed. My palm warmed, and the second plate lifted into the air.

“You know, you don’t have to use your hands. It’s your mind that’s doing the work.”

“I know, but I like doing it this way.”

I let the plates lower to the bed and pointed my palms at Gaige. “I feel like I could lift a cow!”

“Are you calling me a cow?” He grinned and crossed his arms, standing firm.

“No, but if I can lift a cow, I can lift you.” As much as I concentrated, Gaige didn’t budge—not even a quiver.

“Not going to happen,” Gaige said.

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I focused hard, knowing I could do more than a plate or two. “I swear I feel like I should be able to. I know going from dishes to a person is a jump, but there’s nothing else in this room of flipping-from-the-walls furniture to practice on.” I stopped trying. “Let’s order something bigger from the constructor. I’ll work up to you.”

“Nope.” Gaige relaxed his stance now. “You won’t be able to.”

“Thanks for your confidence.”

Gaige came around the bed and kissed me on the cheek. “I have all the confidence in the world in you, but one being cannot move another no matter how skilled they are.”

“We can’t?”

“No. You can only move objects. Living beings have free will. You can’t move them unless they want to be moved.”

“Oh. You could have humored me.”

Gaige grinned. “Let’s take a break. Computer, open windows.”

“Yes, an ocean breeze!” I ran to the windows and waited for them to open. “What’s this ocean’s name again?”

“Sarrin.”

The windows that filled the entire top half of the room waffled, blurring the view to the outside, then disappeared, letting in the sound of the surf crashing onto the beach.

I stuck my hand out and ran my fingers along the edges, just to make sure the windows were really completely gone. “Where do they go?”

Gaige joined me. “It’s just like ordering something from the constructor and sending it away again. I basically sent the windows away. When we want them back, the computer will construct a new set.”

I shook my head. “I guess if clothes can come and go like that, so can windows.” I breathed in the ocean air, fresh and salty with only a hint of fish mixed in. People now dotted the beach . . . “Speaking of clothes!”

Gaige stifled a laugh. “What about them?”

“You know very well what about them. Those people down there are naked!”

“Oh that.” Gaige laughed openly now. “Want to go for a swim?”

“Hmm.” I leaned out the window, peering down at all the naked, tanned flesh. “Well, they do look like they’re enjoying themselves.”

“It’s wonderful,” Gaige said. “Freeing, invigorating even.”

“Well, when in Rome, right?”

“Rome?”

It was my turn to laugh. “It means when you’re someplace—Rome, Anu, wherever—you should act as the locals would. So, let’s do it!” The thought of swimming through those gorgeous, crystal-blue waters with nothing between me and the planet’s resources filled me with a peaceful bliss. I couldn’t wait to connect with everything about my new home. But before I could turn from the window, a dark energy rolled through my body, leaving a terror I couldn’t identify in its wake.

“Victoria? What’s wrong?”

I gripped Gaige’s arm, not exactly sure how to answer. “I don’t know, I feel . . . panic . . . fear . . .”

*Darkness surrounds me, but the sound of footfalls fills my ears. Fast and hard. My own. And others. Close and getting closer. “Run, Robert. Run! We can’t fight these creatures. If they catch us, we’re dead.” The words come out of my mouth in a voice that*

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*doesn't belong to me. I look back over my shoulder as we run. The darkness, splotchy now, dotted with light areas. Lights, on poles. In a parking lot. I catch sight of the creatures. The Tamanacke, with Earthlings who are quickly falling behind them. "Tas has to be told the Tamanacke still live. We have to survive long enough to tell him. Run faster, Robert!" Screams follow the words. Loud, screeching cries for anyone who might be able to hear. Please someone hear. Next to me, my father—Robert—is already running as fast as he can. My strength carries me forward, and I try not to leave him behind. I feel like a bird taking flight every time my feet lift from the ground to take another step. I look back over my shoulder again at the Tamanacke, who have closed the gap between us. A clawed reptilian hand grabs me around the neck, jerking me into the air, no longer a bird but a hangman's subject, feet dangling high above the ground. Claws press hard into my skin, and blood trickles down my neck. To my right, a scaled fist swings down on my father, hitting him with such a blow that he's knocked ten feet through the air. He lands in a heap of limp body parts, still connected in a human form but helter-skelter in its arrangement. I kick and swing my arms, hands balled into fists, desperate to connect with something. But the Tamanacke's reach is longer than mine. I'm held out, dangling in the air. I swing myself, hoping to get enough momentum toward him—like a pendulum on a string—to connect with some critical body part. Shrieking for help, I know that if I'm not saved by some intervention, death is surely what I face.*

“Victoria!” Gaige knelt next to me, shaking me by the shoulders. “Victoria! Answer me!”

“What! What!”

“Zada, she’s awake.” Gaige spoke into the com link incorporated within his clothing while he helped me sit up. “What just happened, Victoria?”

“I . . . I don’t know . . .” My thoughts were like the pieces of a dozen puzzles mixed together. A piece of one puzzle here, a piece of another puzzle there. Nothing fit. Nothing made sense.

“Okay. Thank you, Zada,” Gaige said. “Zada said you were in a vision state. What did you see?”

I sat up and touched my temples. “Ugh. My head is killing me. I need to lie back down.”

Gaige lifted me from the floor and laid me gently on the bed. “Do you remember what you saw?”

“No.” Exhausted, I closed my eyes. I had no choice; I couldn’t hold them open. After resting for a few minutes, patches of the visions slowly came back to me. After another few minutes, the entire vision had fallen into place. The cool night air on my skin. The smells seeping out of the nearby restaurants. The terror that surged through my body. And the realization of what had *really* happened. Not to me, but to my mother. My heart sank. “Gaige.” With my eyes still closed, I reached for him, feeling him close by.

He took my hand. “I’m right here.”

I opened my eyes, but the lids still hung heavy. “It wasn’t a robbery.”

“What wasn’t?”

I closed my eyes again and lay there for another few minutes, trying to gather my strength back. Gaige waited patiently.

I licked my dry lips. “Can you—”

“Yes. Be right back.” In a matter of seconds, Gaige was back at my side. “Here.” He put a hand behind my head and then held a container of water to my mouth.



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I drank three big gulps, took a deep breath, and feeling a bit stronger, began. “My parents. They weren’t killed by random robbers looking for easy money in some dark parking lot. It was the Tamanacke. The Tamanacke did it. Those bastards killed my parents!”

“No.” With glazed eyes, Gaige stared off in the distance. “I can’t believe it.” Gaige broke his stare and turned quickly to me. “I mean . . . I *do* believe you. It’s just hard to grasp. If we had only realized back then that the Tamanacke were on Earth, Tessy would have never been permitted to go to the surface. No Anuans would have been.”

“And my parents would still be alive . . . imagine that, Gaige.”

“But they’d have never met, and you wouldn’t be here.”

“If only there’d been a way to stop the Tamanacke. To save our family.” My mind wandered back to the days when we were still a family. “I think the dreams that haunted me as a child tried to tell me. I just didn’t realize it then. If only I had . . .”

“It’s not your fault. It’s not anybody’s fault, except the Tamanacke.”

“She was so scared, Gaige.” The hole in my heart left by my parents’ deaths seemed to open anew, and warm tears ran down my face.

Gaige wiped the tears from my cheeks. “I’m so sorry, Victoria. Sorry they’re gone and sorry that you had to see it.”

The thin, pink line that ran from the top of one side of Gaige’s neck to the bottom of the other pulsed with his racing heartbeat. The scar was barely noticeable thanks to the Anuan’s advanced medical technologies, but I knew it was there.

Raising a finger to it, I traced the pale line. “I’m sorry for you too, Gaige.” I sat up and leaned into his chest. “We should tell Tas

what really happened to his sister. He's going to be upset. He already blames himself, and he thinks it was a random act. If he knows it was the Tamanacke . . .”

“We'll tell him,” Gaige said. “But there's no rush. I want to make sure you're okay before we even think about that.”

He put his arms around me, and we embraced each other. There was nothing else we could do about what the Tamanacke had done, to my parents or to Gaige. The past was the past. At least I hoped that's where the Tamanacke stayed.

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## 3 - VICTORIA

Trying to decide the best way to tell Tas about the real way my mother died, Gaige and I walked along the glass streets through the city of Nikkoa on our way to meet Brian for lunch. On Anu, streets were for walking, with the only transportation on the planet running silently below the glass walkways. It made for a quiet, peaceful stroll with birdsong and the sound of children's laughter playing in the background—a stark contrast to our conversation.

“Do you think they killed my parents, especially my mom, for revenge against Tas?” I asked. “Or do they hate Anuans so much they just kill them for the satisfaction of eliminating one?”

“They do blame Tas for the deaths of their women and children in the refugee camps he oversaw, but how would killing his sister get back at Tas if he doesn't even know about it? Maybe they do feel a sense of satisfaction merely from our deaths. I don't know. Tas and my dad might understand their motives better than I do.”

“Tas won't want to go after the Tamanacke, will he?”

Gaige pursed his lips. “Even if he does, he couldn't do it alone, and neither the Council nor the War Forces would ever condone a military action for revenge.”

“Good. I still dread telling him.”

“I dread it, too, but we’ll figure out when and how best to do it.” Gaige massaged his temples. “Today, let’s just try to enjoy the city and our lunch with Brian.”

“I like that plan. My brain can use a distraction from that vision.”

“What do you think about Nikkoa?” Gaige asked. “I was born and raised here, when not on Mission Earth, that is.”

Sunlight reflected off the glass and metal of the buildings in sprays of rainbows. Not one dull piece of brick or concrete could be seen. “It’s spectacular. Like the buildings are made of fine crystal.”

“They actually *are* made of crystal. Mostly. So our metaphysical abilities aren’t hampered. Our energies resonate with the crystal. It actually helps amplify them. And Anuans like things as open and natural as possible. We’d never want to be stuck in some dark, stuffy building. We want to see the sun, the sky, the environment we’re living in.”

“I have so much to learn about this place.”

“You have the rest of your life to learn everything you want to know.”

The bottom of my feet tingled. “Wait. I might be sensing something.” I stopped, focusing on the feeling in my feet, and realized it wasn’t metaphysical at all. “The underground transport is coming!”

“Look down,” Gaige said.

I did, just in time to see the transport whip by beneath our feet like a glass bullet. “They’re so fast! And quiet too!”

“*It’s time.*”

“Time for what?” I asked.

“What?” Gaige wrinkled his brow.

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“You said, ‘It’s time.’ Time for what?” I sensed my surroundings shrinking in on me, but we were still standing in the middle of one of Nikkoa’s broad pathways with plenty of room to move around. And to breathe, which I didn’t seem to be doing well. “No . . . you didn’t say anything, did you? Something’s . . . wrong.”

Gaige was in my face in a split second. “Take a breath. Victoria, look at me.” He gave me a gentle shake. “Breathe!”

I inhaled a huge gulp of air, and the feeling passed as suddenly as it had come. “I’m . . . I think I’m okay.”

“What happened?” Gaige was still nose-to-nose with me and wrapped in anxiety.

“It was a feeling. Like something was terribly wrong, but it’s gone. I feel fine now.”

Gaige straightened himself to his full height and let out a sigh. “Okay. Good. But you thought something was wrong? Do you know what? Do you think it had something to do with the vision you saw of your parents?”

“I don’t know. It happened so fast.” My head pounded, and I couldn’t stand thinking about what happened to my parents anymore or what the feeling I’d just had might have meant. “Can we . . . forget about it? For the moment, anyway? I want to focus on this wonderful planet and family and friends. It’s almost time to meet Brian. Can we catch the transport now and just put this on hold until later?”

Gaige hesitated, my worrier husband battling himself to allow me space. “Of course.” Sticking close, Gaige guided me by an elbow into the sun-filled transport tunnels. “But I think we should arrange to have you meet with the Council soon. They’ll start

helping you manage your abilities. They're beyond anything I experience."

As intimidating as meeting with the Council sounded, Gaige was right. The sooner I let them start helping me, the better. Being in the presence of a planet full of high-energy beings had definitely enhanced the metaphysical abilities passed down from my mother, and I couldn't continue to let these episodes sneak up on me. "I agree. I'll start seeing them whenever you want to arrange it."

My overprotective husband was satisfied for the moment, and we entered the clear transport and shot off toward Mission Earth, where Brian still resided.

When we arrived at Brian's quarters only minutes later, he put down a technical manual he'd been studying, scooted all the gadgets he'd ordered from the constructor to one side of the table, and stood to greet us. He tipped his head to me and extended a hand to Gaige. "Please, have a seat."

Gaige shook Brian's hand then pulled out a chair for me, and we sat down.

"How are you feeling today?" I asked Brian.

"I feel great. This place is amazing."

Gaige eyed Brian's stash. "You like the constructor?"

"I do. That thing is fuc—uh." Brian's face turned red. "Freaking awesome. Sorry, Tori. Er, Victoria, I mean."

I tried not to laugh. "It's okay, Brian. I've heard the word before. You're not my mentor here, so you can be yourself and say whatever you'd like. That includes calling me Tori. It's what you're used to, and it doesn't bother me."

Brian's face lightened back to its natural coloring. He picked up an object that looked similar to a gyroscope and studied it, his

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eyes practically sparkling. “True, we’re definitely not in our lab anymore.” He dropped the object back onto the table. “Still, I’ll watch my mouth . . . Tori.” He smiled.

“Okay, Brian.” I smiled back. New ground rules set. It had been hard to drop his Dr. title—Brian held a doctorate of aeronautical engineering—when I worked for him but, being on a spaceship light-years from our laboratory made it a bit easier.

“So, speaking of not being back home anymore.” Brian cleared his throat. His energy felt tense, nervous even. “I’m learning that I probably don’t have much to offer in engineering. Anuans are already so far beyond what I know. But now that I’ve recovered and am pretty much acclimated to your gravity, I need to start paying my own bills. I’m sure I owe a bundle so far. I have some thoughts on how I can contribute.”

“You don’t owe a thing,” Gaige said.

“Look. I appreciate your generosity. I really do.” Brian leaned forward and rested an arm on the table. “But I want to pay my own way.”

“You don’t understand,” Gaige said. “I’m not being generous. Nobody pays for anything here. We have no monetary system.”

Brian stared at Gaige as if expecting him to say “April fool!” or something. “Are you shitting me?” he finally said.

I could only imagine what must have been going through Gaige’s mind if he’d never heard the term “shitting me” before. I watched for his classic brow wrinkle. Nothing; he knew this one.

“No, I’m not . . . *shitting you*.” Gaige did wrinkle his nose at the expression but only slightly. “We don’t pay for anything in our society. Nor do we get paid for doing our jobs.”

Brian cocked his head. “Seriously?”

“Yes, I’m serious,” Gaige said. “We have no monetary system. You live, eat, enjoy life, and don’t owe anybody anything for it. You’ll work when you figure out what you’d like to do. What you don’t know, you’ll learn. If you don’t like what you’ve chosen, you choose something else. Eventually, you’ll find something you love and will contribute not because you need to in order to pay bills, but because you love what you’re doing. There’s balance in that.”

Understanding some of the issues Brian might be wrestling with, I decided to jump into the conversation. “Let me help you understand, Brian. On Earth we have jobs we couldn’t imagine anybody wanting to do. For example, who would find joy in scooping poop?”

“Uh, yeah,” Brian said.

“But here, they have technologies well beyond those on Earth. So, a job like that would be done by a computerized machine, designed and made by someone who loves to design and make computerized machines. See?”

“Okay, I get that . . .”

“Trust me,” Gaige said. “It all works out. There’s such a variety in people’s passions that everything is covered. So, are you okay with this arrangement now?”

Brian sat back in his chair with a big smile on his face. “I think I can live with it.”

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Brian’s face still held a smile when we reached the binmar—what the Anuans called their social areas—for lunch. We led him into the open front of Gaige’s favorite restaurant. Strong spices and fresh scents hung in the air.



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“Smells great,” Brian said. “I’ve tried a few Anuan things through the constructor but was afraid to get too adventurous.”

“Anything we eat should be compatible with your body,” Gaige said. “Kians—I mean Earthlings—and Anuans are, after all, both human.”

We wound between generously spaced tables interspersed with casual seating. All of them spread out beneath a sunny space-view window that ran from overhead to down one side of the restaurant. Gaige found a round table in the back where we might be able to talk more easily without disruptions from the meandering guests. The Anuans treated restaurants more like their own homes than public places. They’d roam about, visiting with each other. Everybody seemed to know everybody else, and they loved being social. Brian hadn’t been to any of the common areas yet, but now that he was acclimated to full Anuan gravity, he could make the excursion. His eyes wandered to everyone and everything in the restaurant.

“I’ve been wanting to ask, what are the windows on this ship made of?” Brian said. “And are there safeguards against them cracking while in space? And can any of the sections be isolated in case of a breach?”

Gaige opened his mouth to answer after each question, but Brian didn’t give him a chance.

“And . . . oh, sorry.” Brian grimaced. “Hard to answer if I don’t shut up, huh? This place is just so incredible.”

“That’s okay,” Gaige said. “It’s nice to see that you’re excited about everything.”

With Gaige finally able to get a word in, he started answering Brian’s questions. Since Gaige’s father was captain of Mission Earth and his mother was an engineer, Gaige had grown up around

the technical aspects of the ship and loved discussing the finest details with Brian.

I sat listening with my elbows on the table and my chin resting on my fists. I had been an engineering student but had only made it partway through my freshman year before being swept into my new reality as an Anuan. Though I didn't quite follow everything, I still found the conversation fascinating. But during a particularly technical discussion, my mind wandered, and I found myself picking up feelings from Brian, feelings that ran much deeper than the exchange he was having with Gaige. I felt contentment in him, peace about being here, maybe even happiness. Mostly. But deep down, I detected a little, hidden part of him that held sorrow and regret and longing for something that had been lost to him. I couldn't help sinking deeper into his emotions, searching—

A loud bang rang out. I jumped and started to scream but realized not one other person in the room had reacted. I pressed my lips together to stifle my scream—the sound had been in my own head.

“What is it?” Gaige placed his hands on the edge of the table like he was about to push himself into orbit rather than just up from the table. His eyes scanned the room.

Brian had reached to his hip but quickly brought his hand back to the table. “Are you all right, Tori?”

I held my hands up. “It was nothing.”

“Nothing?” Now the wrinkled brow. No one in Gaige's vicinity probably ever needed to bother with their empathic abilities. What he felt was always written on his face.

“Uh . . . a bug. I thought I saw a bug.”

Gaige curled his lip. “Here? I've never seen any bugs on this ship.”

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“Well, it must have only been a shadow then.” I shot Gaige a piercing look.

“Oh! Okay. A shadow.” Gaige let go of the edge of the table. “Why don’t we decide on our food, if Brian’s ready.”

“I’m always ready to eat,” Brian said. “Sure you’re all right, Tori?”

“I’m sure. It was nothing. Let’s order our food.”

Gaige and Brian continued their technical conversations, and we ate a nice meal together, but I couldn’t stop wondering about Brian. He was content here. I felt that. But something from his past still pulled at him, no matter how deep he tried to bury it. That kind of sadness had a way of smacking someone in the face when they least expected it. And I had the feeling Brian would be no exception.

## 4 - VICTORIA

Gaige and I rode the ibbs to the top of the structure in which our beach quarters were located. With a quiet puff, the pod doors opened onto a vast asper-covered area with the majesty of the city standing beyond in one direction and a drop-off to the beach in the other direction. With Gaige sticking by my side, I walked across the asper that covered the top of our building and looked over the edge of the cliff in which our building was embedded. The waves gently washed up onto a sparkling, white beach lit by the sunlight. If I hadn't just been in the building below my feet, I wouldn't have known the structure even existed.

“Don't you have earthquakes here?” I asked.

“Occasionally.” A small hovercraft off in the distance that dipped in and out of the waters caught Gaige's eye, but his attention soon came back to me. “Why?”

“With these structures built right into the cliff, wouldn't they be damaged?”

“Oh. No, the building's design and materials allow for movements.”

As obvious as it was, I still had to keep reminding myself that I wasn't on Earth anymore. “Of course they do.”

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Gaige smiled at me. “You’ll get used to things. I promise.” He turned from the ocean and pointed to a spot about ten feet from the edge of the cliff. “How about there?”

“Looks good to me.” I spread the blanket on the ground and started smoothing out the wrinkles.

“I’ve spoken with the Council,” Gaige said. “They can meet with you in the morning.”

A little butterfly fluttered in my stomach at the thought of meeting such revered beings. “That soon?”

“You said—”

“No, you’re right. The sooner, the better.”

“Okay. Good.” Gaige straightened a corner of the blanket and sat down. “You don’t need to be nervous. They’re very nice people.”

I joined him on the blanket. “I know.” I exhaled, allowing the tension to leave my body and logic to enter—the Councilors were here to help people like me. And they would.

“Dad and Tas want to talk to me and Conner about something. So, I’ll meet with them on the ship while you’re with the Councilors.”

“That sounds good. Now, let’s concentrate on us.” I bit my lip in an attempt to settle my hormones. As much as I loved sunsets, I really looked forward to the rest of our evening plans—spending time together back in our quarters.

Gaige glanced toward the horizon. I could almost see the gears spinning in his head as he calculated how long before the sunset was over. “Right. Concentrate.”

I laughed. “We could skip—”

“No. No, you’ve been deprived of this planet your whole life. I can wait a few more minutes while you enjoy your new home.”

Gaige and I pressed the sides of our filter strips—thin, clear pieces of something like flimsy plastic—to our temples. The filter strips didn't darken the view the way Earth sunglasses did. Everything was just as colorful as without them, but I didn't have to squint to enjoy looking at anything, even directly at Anu's sun.

I swiveled on my butt from the ocean to the city and back around again. "I can't decide what to watch, the sun over the ocean or all those colors reflected in the buildings."

"Neither would be a bad choice." Gaige had decided on the ocean view and, getting more settled, propped his knees up and rested his arms on them. "You want to tell me about that bug today? Or shadow? Or whatever it really was?"

"Oh that," I said, deciding on the ocean view as well. "What did you feel from Brian today?"

"The same thing you probably did. There's a sadness in him."

"It's more than what's happened because of us," I said. "You know, prison, being brought here. It's a lot of change to deal with, but that's not what's causing his sadness."

"No. He's happy here. It's something else. Well-hidden, though. Even from himself sometimes. Is that what the bug thing was about?"

"Yes. I heard a bang. I don't know what it was, other than being about the sadness Brian has buried."

A large, white bird the size of a swan flew over our heads, its long, lavender-tipped wings coming close enough for us to feel the breeze they created.

I instinctively ducked. "What the hell was that?"

"A golla bird," Gaige said. "Watch him."

The bird soared over the ocean and disappeared below its surface.

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I rose to my feet for a better view. “What’s he doing? He’s going to drown.”

Gaige held a finger up. “Just wait . . .”

After about a minute, the bird rocketed from the water, a fat, blue fish in its sleek, long beak.

“They can stay under water for up to five minutes. They have webbed feet that help propel them and eyes that can spot a fish from a mile away, even under water. As long as the water’s clear, which it will be until you get too deep for our sun to penetrate.”

“That was awesome.” I sat back down, thinking about the bird for a minute, but then my thoughts went back to Brian. “So, could we help him? Brian, not the bird.”

“No.” Gaige said. “Not until he wants help. Right now, he only wants to forget, bury it deep. Whatever *it* is.”

I didn’t want Brian to be sad, didn’t want anyone to be sad. Others’ feelings were more and more my own in my ever-growing awareness as an empath. I wasn’t yet sure how to balance my desire to help alleviate the sadness I felt in other people with their privacy and desire to deal with things in their own ways.

“You can almost hear it hiss when it touches,” Gaige said.

The sun rested on the horizon now, about to sink itself into the ocean just like the golla bird had.

“Almost.”

I found myself actually listening for the sound as the sun descended lower and lower, leaving the sky filled with reds and oranges, until the yellow disk had completely disappeared below the horizon and only the fading sunset colors remained stretched across the sky.

“I could do this every evening,” I said.

“We very well could . . .”

*A distant hum muffled out Gaige's voice, and the salty air turned dank and musty. The twilight colors disappeared, replaced by a dim, cold place . . . somewhere.*

"Gaige, what's happening?"

*I felt along the rough corridor walls, trying to find my way back to Gaige and the cliff, then trying to find something else. Something familiar. Something I loved. I expected to find whatever drew me around every corner.*

*"It's time." The words came from somewhere in the distance. Time for what, I wondered.*

*Whatever I sought slipped further and further from me. "No, don't leave me."*

*"It's time."*

*"Time for what! Time for what!"*

"Open your eyes, Victoria! It's Gaige. You're here, with me! Bring yourself back!"

I opened my eyes and still sat on the cliff overlooking the now starry sky above the ocean.

"Are you all right?"

My hands shook uncontrollably, and my body lost the strength to sit. I leaned into Gaige. "I don't know."

"Zada said you were in another vision state. I'm still in contact with her. Okay. Okay. Thank you, Zada. She said you're okay but will feel weak for a while."

"I think she's right about that."

"I'll take you home." Gaige lifted me from the ground and started walking. "Do you remember what the vision was about?"

"Kind of. But I don't understand it." My head bounced against Gaige's chest with each step he took. I didn't have the energy to hold it up, though. "I was in some dreary, musty place. It felt like



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a cave but wasn't. I think I was looking for something, but I'm not sure."

"It's good that you'll be seeing the Council in the morning."

*Yes, that will be good,* I wanted to say, but no words came out of my mouth. Next thing I knew, my body sank into the soft, air-filled material of our bed.

I'm not sure how long I drifted in and out of sleep but when I finally had the energy to open my eyes, Gaige sat on the edge of the bed watching me.

"How are you feeling?"

"Wiped out."

"I can tell." Gaige lifted my hand to his lips and kissed it. "Just rest."

"You're not getting out of our plans that easily, Alien."

"But—"

"Get in here." I pushed back the light sheet that lay over me. "You're the best medicine I could get."

Gaige hesitated for a moment then crawled into the bed and proved me right; our union restored my energy better than any additional rest ever could have. No more visions interrupted our night, and we enjoyed a wonderful time together, but I had a feeling I hadn't seen the last of that dark place.

## 5 - BRIAN

I examined my pile of constructed items, which now covered the entire top of my dining table, trying to decide what to order next. I settled for something I didn't need to think too much about. "Computer, Jack and Coke over ice."

"Confirm, Jack and Coke, an Earth beverage mixture consisting of distilled alcohol and carbonated soft drink."

"That's correct, computer."

"Define ratio."

"Hmm. Let's go with two ounces of Jack and eight ounces of Coke."

The drink appeared in the constructor compartment, transparent at first, then solid enough to touch. I picked up the glass and jiggled it. The ice made a delicate tinkling sound against the glass. Looked the same. Sounded the same. Almost like being back home. Through the huge space-view window, the city of Nikkoa twinkled like a Christmas tree. Almost magical. "Nope, not home at all. And who needs to sit at a table when I have that?"

I dropped down onto a chair next to the window. The sleek, streamlined seat looked as hard as a rock until I sat on it, then it was like sitting on a big, fat pillow. "Perfect. Bottoms up." I swallowed the drink and lowered my glass. "Yep. Tastes the same too." Wasn't sure if constructed whiskey had any real alcohol

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content, but at least the taste was familiar. Like an old friend I hadn't seen in a while.

“So R2 . . .”

The little disc-shaped droid assistant, who they'd let me name, floated a little closer. “Yes, Brian?”

“No monetary system here, huh?”

“No.” Tiny lights flickered on the droid as it spoke. “The Anuans do not have a monetary system as you would know it on Earth, though there is value exchanged in most everything the Anuans do. Would you like me to elaborate?”

“No, I get it. Just nice to hear a voice besides my own.” Still thinking about the Anuan's money situation, I jiggled my glass again, ready for a refill. “Wait! Money . . . wallet . . . my wallet!”

With a clank, I sat the glass down on the small table next to me, jumped out of my chair, and slapped a spot on the wall where a drawer sprang out. In it were my only worldly possessions—the outfit I had on when the Anuans transitioned me from my prison cell to their ship and the wallet I'd had in my pocket. The government cronies who'd thrown me in that cell had cleaned the wallet of everything from my cash to my credit cards to my driver's license. They didn't plan on me ever getting out, and if I did, they were going to make sure I had no means of getting anywhere.

“Please be there.” I dug behind a flap inside the bill section, pulled out a small, crumpled photo, and held it to my chest. “Thank God.”

I'd kept the photo tucked away just like the memories, but after a few minutes, I gathered enough nerve to look at it for the first time in years. The little boy with a lick of blond hair at the back of his head that never quite lay down right had on his favorite

turtle sweater. The one that was hard to get off him long enough to even wash. That precious little boy—*my* boy—stared back at me with his big, trusting, brown eyes.

“You didn’t get *this*, did you, you shitheads?”

But the mere thought that I could have lost the photo forever, the only thing I had left of my son, caused a sob to burst from my chest like a dam that had finally been breached. I couldn’t stop it. And I didn’t try. Just dropped to my knees and let emotions that had been pent up for far too long rock my body. “I’m so sorry, little buddy.”

“May I be of assistance?” R2 said, lowering itself to my level.

I sniffed, took a breath, and tried to pull myself together. R2 was only a machine but acted so damn human. “No. No thank you. I’m fine. I’ll be fine.” I placed my hand on the table to push myself up from the floor and brushed against the empty glass. “On second thought. You can get me another Jack and Coke. Fifty-fifty ratio this time. And make sure this one has some real alcohol in it.”

## 6 - VICTORIA

The shadow of the Great Council Hall fell over us, not in ominous dark voids where light was absent or obscured, but in splashes of rainbows created as the sun refracted and reflected through and off the building's crystalline structures.

A thin rainbow lit one cheek of Gaige's stoic face as he stood looking up at the pyramid-shaped building. "They'll help you figure out what's going on."

"I'm sure they will. This is just another adjustment I need to go through. I've come through others fine."

He took my hand. "Yes, you will. You're the strongest person I know."

We walked up steps, the width of which equaled that of the pyramid, and stopped in front of a towering pair of glass doors.

"You ready?" Gaige asked.

"I am. But *you* need to get to your meeting. I'll find you when I'm done, and we'll talk to Tas."

"I can stay with you. After that episode you had last night, I'm sure Dad and Tas will understand if I miss the meeting. Conner and the rest of the ground team can cover new recruit training afterwards."

"No. You do what you had planned. I'll be fine. I'll see you on the ship when I'm finished." I looked over Gaige's shoulder at the

looming form of Mission Earth off in the distance. “You don’t need to worry about me getting lost.” I tipped my head toward the ship, which could be seen from anywhere in the city.

“I suppose I don’t. All right.” He leaned down and gave me a light kiss. His lips lingered near mine for a moment before fully pulling away. “You can link to me here just like you could on the ship if you need anything. I’ll see you later.” He turned to go.

“Hey!”

Gaige turned back, and I kissed him—*really* kissed him.

“Wow. What was that for? Not that I’m complaining.”

“To hold you over until we get home tonight.”

Gaige smiled and strode off toward Mission Earth with a little swagger in his steps. I watched him until he turned down a street and out of sight, then with a deep breath, I stared at the doors of the Great Council Hall, ready to take control of the episodes I’d been having.

“Victoria Ardessa, requesting entry.”

“Entry granted,” the computer said.

The doors slid open, and my reflection stared back at me from another set of double doors. I took a few steps forward. The doors to the outside closed, and the ones in front of me opened. After walking through the second set of doors, which also closed softly behind me, I turned back and could still clearly see the outside of the pyramid.

“It’s like your one-way glass.” An elegant woman with shoulder-length, gray hair that swept back from her face approached me. She wore a two-piece outfit very much like the ship suits I’d worn on Mission Earth, only hers was bright gold. Tiny sparkles in the sheen of the material reflected the light of the room. “We find the glass provides privacy without the feeling of

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confinement and without spoiling the exterior aesthetics of the structure.”

“Oh. Yes, of course. The building *is* beautiful.”

“Thank you, my child. I am Denia, Lead Councilor for Mission Earth.”

“I’m Victoria Ardessa,” I said, looking into aqua-blue eyes that only an Anuan could have. “My husband, Gaige Ardessa, and my doctor, Zada Renolt, thought you could help me with some episodes I’ve been having since arriving on-planet.”

“Yes, we’ve been following your progress. You have abilities that must be nurtured properly. We thought we’d give you some time to get used to being Anuan first, but your abilities dictate otherwise. Come.” Denia stepped aside and outstretched her arm toward the center of the room where three other people in lighter gold outfits sat in a circle of floating chairs, two empty chairs among them. Clear disks about the size of small pizza trays with cylindrical containers sitting on them floated next to each chair.

The closer we got to the circle, the more my nerve endings tingled, as if I were approaching an electric current.

Denia stopped and stood silent, as if listening for something. “Very impressive. You sense us, don’t you?”

“I feel . . . something. A tingle or buzz. The sensation is hard to describe.”

“Energy. You feel our energy. Most Anuans cannot detect the wavelengths at which our energy resonates. Even our gifted take time to develop that level of awareness. Yes, impressive indeed. But dangerous if not properly managed. We should begin. Please sit.”

I sat, a bit overwhelmed, not only by the sensations my body was experiencing but also by Denia’s words.

Denia entered the center of the circle. “May I introduce the Councilors who will be working with you? I’ve selected them myself based on your unique situation.” She stepped next to a woman with blond hair pulled back in a ponytail. “Jahnay’s abilities started to present at the age of about twenty-five earth years. The youngest ever, until you. About a year ago, after four years of training, she was inducted as the youngest full Councilor in our recorded history. I felt she could best relate to both your youth and your early stage of development.”

Jahnay nodded her head, her ponytail swaying. “Yes, I still remember how exhausting learning how to sharpen and manage my abilities was. Still is, really. And I know this bunch can seem intimidating when you first meet them. But they’re all so nice and helpful. You’ll see.”

“Jahnay speaks the truth. We’re here to help you,” Denia said. “Eighteen is very young. But your extraordinary abilities have presented, and you must learn to manage them, whether you should decide to become a Councilor or not. Your youth presents a unique situation, so we need to count on you to take heed in everything we tell you, for your own sake.”

I couldn’t believe that a girl who was only half-Anuan and raised on Earth could become one of the Anuans’ most highly regarded members of society. With my inherent abilities, it was true. But I had to focus on one step at a time and, at that moment, getting these episodes under control was my priority. I’d worry about the rest later. “I understand.”

“Good,” Denia said. “I sense that you not only understand what I’m asking of you, but you also understand the enormity of your gifts. That is the first step.”



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Denia then moved next to one of the most gorgeous men I'd ever seen outside the cover of a romance novel. His curly, shoulder-length hair would have made any woman jealous. The lighting in the hall enhanced its healthy, jet-black shine and caused his liquid-brown eyes to twinkle.

"This is Roccold," Denia said. "He is another of our younger Councilors. His abilities presented at thirty. He's been with us for eight years, including three years as a trainee. As with Jahnay, I felt his youth would be beneficial in relating to what you're going through. Do not let their youth fool you, though. They are powerful Councilors."

"Nice to meet you," he said, in a warm, silky voice. "Like Denia and Jahnay have expressed, you can count on us for whatever you need."

"And Galaird." Denia stopped at the third and final Councilor. "Both Galaird and I have been Councilors for many, many decades and have some of the most developed skills of any Anuan. We believe the level of ability Galaird and I possess will be necessary in order to properly guide you. Anuans have not seen one with your potential for a very long time. Your great-great-grandmother was the last who even came close. She mentored me as a young trainee. I see much of her in you."

"As do I." A smile creased Galaird's leathery face. "Welcome, Victoria." The point of his gray beard brushed the front of his ship suit as he spoke. "It is an honor to work with you. I knew your great-great-grandmother as well. She was an exceptional Anuan."

I wondered just how old Galaird was. Denia, too, for that matter. Denia didn't look like she'd been doing anything for "many, many decades."

“We certainly know who *you* are, Victoria,” Denia said. “So, with introductions out of the way, let’s begin. You may sit here.” Denia motioned to the chair next to Galaird then took the empty seat next to mine. “We followed your progress on the ship. Never having been exposed to your Anuan people and their metaphysical abilities, we know it was a difficult adjustment. But you *did* adjust. Relatively quickly too. Now, for your present concern. Zada shared that you’ve gone into vision states several times in the few days you’ve been on-planet. We need to help you both with interpretation of those visions and with control over them. Allowing visions to pull you away from your reality can be potentially dangerous. Zada could only give us a brief report. We’d like to hear about your visions in detail, from you.”

I shifted in my seat to get comfortable. The floating chair bobbed slightly with my movement. “Yes, one time was more of a feeling than a vision, though. A feeling of . . . dread, maybe, like everything was about to close in on me. I also heard someone say ‘It’s time.’ I thought that was just my imagination until I heard it again with my most recent episode.”

“Please tell us about that one,” Denia said.

“Well, I was watching the sunset with Gaige when our surroundings faded away and were replaced with darkness. I could smell the musty scent of wherever I’d gone. I could feel the place, too, just like I was there. It was too dark to see, so I felt my way along rough corridors.” I rubbed my unmarred palms. “My hands still feel raw.”

Denia left her seat and took my hand, placing her palm over it. “Yes. The energy here has been disrupted.” She released my hand. “Please, go on.” She stayed close by, and I thought she may have been further assessing my energy.

## The Anuan Mission

“I was scared at first and wanted to be back on the cliff with Gaige but then was drawn to something I *had* to find. That’s when I heard a voice I didn’t recognize say ‘It’s time.’ I was certain I heard it that time. Then I felt whatever I’d been searching for slipping away, growing more distant.” I rubbed the muscles of my sore neck. “That’s all I remember.”

Denia moved behind me and held her hands over my shoulders. “May I? It will help the tension.”

“Yes, please.” I removed my own hand from the sore muscles. Heat radiated from Denia’s palms, and after only a moment, the tightness in my neck loosened. I tipped my head back and forth, testing. In any position, my neck felt free of tension and pain. “That feels wonderful. Thank you, Denia.”

“You’re most welcome. Visions can be troublesome, especially in the early phases when you don’t know how to understand or control them.” Denia returned to her seat. “You have stated the vision you just described was unclear. This is a characteristic of a future vision. The future is not set, so the vision will be a bit out of focus, if you will. Let us discuss the first vision you had. I believe that was one you did understand. One from the past. Was that vision clear?”

I swallowed, my mouth becoming dry. “Too clear.”

“There is water in the container next to you.” Denia pointed a graceful finger toward the cylindrical container on the table floating next to me. “I know recalling the vision will be difficult. Please, take your time.”

I took several sips of water and sat the container back on the table. As much as I wanted to forget the horrible way my parents died, I brought the vision to life in my mind. The cool night air, the scent of Italian foods wafting from the restaurant my parents

had just left. The absolute panic my mother felt when she realized the Tamanacke were there. Not merely on Earth, but only yards away from her. “I’m ready.”

Denia leaned over and laid a hand on my arm. “We’re here for you. Take all the time you need.”

“Thank you.” I swallowed then exhaled slow and steady. “It was believed that my parents were killed in a robbery-gone-bad, but in my vision, I saw the Tamanacke chasing them in the parking lot where they were killed. They snatched my mother up by the neck and swatted my father through the air. He landed in a crumpled heap. It was so real. I could feel the Tamanacke’s claws digging into my neck when he picked my mother up.”

Denia’s energy waffled, and she pulled her hand from my arm. “You felt your mother’s pain?”

“Yes. Is that bad?”

“No, nothing is good or bad. It merely gives rise to a question. Tell me, was this vision linear? Did it seem to go in time sequence and stay within the same place, not like a dream which might bounce from place to place or change the people who are present?”

“It was very linear, no bouncing around like a dream at all.”

“A true vision then.” Denia didn’t speak for a long while—long enough for the silence to become uncomfortable. Instead she exchanged eye contact with the other Councilors in the room. The thick energy made my entire body buzz. *Worried*. They were worried. And *shocked*.

“Is everything okay? I feel . . . I don’t know. Stress, concern . . . I can’t sort everything out.” I put my head in my hands, trying to find some grounding in the swirl of emotions.

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I felt a calm energy come over me, strongest on the side nearest Denia. I raised my head. Denia had her eyes closed, as if concentrating—or providing the calm I needed. She opened her eyes. Though the Councilor’s energy had settled, I didn’t sense the issue had been resolved but rather stifled, or muffled, for my sake.

“I apologize, Victoria. We are just a bit . . . confused by something. We must be more cognizant of your sensitivity level. Perhaps we should take some time to meditate about it.” Denia took a deep breath. “Before we do so, let us leave you with some information that might help you. First, know that you have control over your visions—you need only to take it. If another vision should come upon you, *will it* to show itself without pulling you away from your environment. You have that power or will in time and with practice. Until then, Gaige and Zada assure me that you are well-monitored. Second, pay close attention to whether your visions are clear or not. This clarity, or lack thereof, would indicate past versus future. And, if you have a vision while sleeping, notice whether it is linear, which would indicate a vision, or inconsistent, which would indicate a dream. Can you remember those things?”

“Yes,” I said. “All that is pretty straightforward.”

“Very well then.” Denia held out her hand to help me from my chair. “That will be enough for today. We don’t want to tire you. Please come back tomorrow, and we will begin some exercises that will help you in developing control over your visions. Learning to master your abilities will be a long process. But a necessary one.”

## 7 - GAIGE

When I entered my father's private planning room, he and Tas were talking quietly near the space-view window that now overlooked the city instead of the darkness of space. Conner sat at the oblong, planning table poking at a virtual reaction-challenge game.

Conner looked up, and the game screeched out that he'd lost. "All right! Next time. End sequence," he said, and the game faded from sight.

My dad gave me a nod. "Okay, let's get started."

We all joined Conner at the table.

"We have something we want to show you," Dad said. "Open controls."

A control panel appeared in the air in front of him, and he started pressing virtual buttons until a map of the United States sprang up above the control panel. Multiple red dots littered the map.

Tas put a finger on the map and slung it against the wall behind me and Conner, where it expanded to the full width of the wall. Conner and I swiveled around to face the map.

"All these locations marked in red . . . the Council has felt anomalies around them for quite some time." Tas pointed to a dot in Nevada. "This is where the government agents who pursued

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Gaige and Victoria went to meet with the people we now believe were the Tamanacke. We think every one of these are Tamanacke locations.” Tas punched through the image, causing it to waffle. “They’ve been rebuilding their armies right under our noses! Hiding from us until they were strong enough to reengage.” Tas paced in front of the map, which had settled back into a steady image. “The Tamanacke are normally not this patient. I suppose they didn’t have a choice. Lay low and keep quiet, or we’d have dealt with them when they were weak and easier to defeat.”

I now wondered if that was the reason the Tamanacke hadn’t rubbed murdering Tas’s sister in his face. Were they waiting until they’d rebuilt their armies and were stronger? I bounced my legs in a nervous jitter, anxious for our meeting to be over. My dad glanced at me, and I stilled my legs. I also blocked my anxiety. No need to get into what Victoria had seen now. Victoria would need to be a part of that conversation—Tas would have questions that only she could answer. But we had to tell Tas fast, before the Tamanacke did.

“This is only speculation,” my father said. “The Tamanacke may be in all those locations, but the odds that they’ve rebuilt large armies may not be a likely scenario since most of their women and children died in the refugee camps.”

“Don’t underestimate them, Daigon,” Tas said.

As Conner asked about the number of locations—twenty-one—and Tas continued to grumble about the Tamanacke, my mind raced. Avenging his sister in a moment of anger against a handful of Tamanacke refugees would never come to fruition. Even if Tas had trouble resolving his anger, an act of revenge would never be permitted. But a rebuilt Tamanacke army coming *at* the Anuans would be a different situation all together.

“Even if they have rebuilt their numbers, you don’t know for sure they want to reengage, right?” I asked. “It’s been a long time since the war. Maybe they’re content to just be alive and surviving.”

Dad pushed back from the table and stood to get a closer look at the map, though the image was plenty big enough to see from the planning table. “No, we don’t know anything for sure. We’re basing our assumptions on past history with these beings. But the War Forces have been notified of the possibility.” He came around the table and sat down next to me. “Gauge, you might as well know now. We’d like Victoria’s help to find out information about the Tamanacke.”

My breakfast suddenly sat like a rock in my stomach. “No. It’s too much. She barely knows what to do with her abilities. You can’t open up an uncontrolled mind to the Tamanacke.”

“Her mind is open to them already,” Dad said. “Victoria is the only person who has ever been able to sense the Tamanacke directly in any way. Maybe she can help us learn more about what’s going on. Without definitive information, we’re just guessing. We’ve discussed it with the Council. Due to the abilities Victoria has already presented, they’ll be mentoring her anyway and have agreed to guide her in seeking out the Tamanacke.”

“If she agrees,” Tas added. “None of us want her put in harm’s way. The Council has assured me that if this is something Victoria wants to do, they’ll take every precaution to protect her emotional well-being. If it appears seeking out the Tamanacke will be too much for her, it will be stopped immediately.”

I shook my head. “I don’t like the idea. I don’t want her in the middle of whatever is going on with those creatures. She’s already



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overwhelmed. Why even *attempt* to put her through this? It'll be too much, too soon."

Dad put his hand on my shoulder. "Just think about this for a while, Gaige. I don't like the idea either, but she could mean all the difference . . ." He didn't finish his sentence, but I knew how it ended. *She could mean all the difference to our survival.*

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## 8 - TAS

Daigon watched the door close as Conner and Gaige left his planning room. “I don’t like that their generation has to even consider the possibility of facing the Tamanacke.”

“I don’t either.” I walked to the side of the room where the constructor was located. “Stress orb.”

A stress orb slowly materialized inside the constructor indentation. When it had solidified, I grabbed it and threw it across the room. It hit the wall and I grabbed it when it bounced back to me.

“Tas,” Daigon said, leaning back in his chair. “It *is* very unlikely the Tamanacke have rebuilt their armies to any significant numbers. There just weren’t enough of their females left.”

“I realize that better than anybody. I watched them all die in my care.”

“Disease took them, not you.”

“That didn’t make it any easier to watch.” I squeezed the stress orb. “And the Tamanacke will never believe that’s the way it happened.” I threw the orb again as hard as I could. It came whizzing back. Stopping next to me, it hovered there, waiting on me to take it again. Trying to guess what the Tamanacke were doing had caused an ache to anchor itself deep inside me, and it

## The Anuan Mission

wouldn't let go. "I just don't have a good feeling about this, Daigon." I grabbed the stress orb and threw it again, this time snatching it as soon as it rebounded.

"You're too close to the situation," Daigon said. "You need to step back and let Victoria and the Council figure out the status and the intentions of the Tamanacke. You may well find that we have nothing to worry about."

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## 9 - LOME

Cruck entered my office and bowed his head. “They’re ready, Candar Lome.”

“Excellent,” I responded.

We left the room and walked down the corridor, with Cruck falling in step by my side. Our footfalls, strong and dominant, echoed off the musty, concrete walls of the underground tunnels. “We’ll soon be free of these dreary accommodations.”

“Yes, I barely remember living in the sunshine.” Cruck snorted. “But I do remember enough to know it’s preferable to this stinking place.”

“First our revenge, then our domination, then as much sunshine and fresh air as we care to enjoy.”

We stopped at the arena’s double doors. Cruck pushed a button on the wall, and the doors swung open to reveal row after row of Tamanacke warriors with heads bowed.

“Attention,” Cruck yelled.

The warriors lifted their heads, and the roar of their voices rose up from the arena floor. “Hail, Candar Lome!”

I inhaled with pride as if these warriors standing before me, strong and brave, were my own children. In a way, they were.

“The troops are ready for your inspection, Candar. Over a thousand here, then we’ll transition to the other locations.”

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With Cruck following close behind, I walked down the stairs leading to the bottom of the arena and traversed up and down each row. Every warrior stood tall and fit, with eyes focused straight ahead. Ready.

“Will we defeat our enemy?” I yelled.

“We will be victorious!” The troop’s response filled the arena, echoing off the rafters high above.

I soaked in the power behind those booming voices. *Yes, we will.* “Cruck, I’m ready to inspect the rest of the troops.”

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## 10 - VICTORIA

Gaige and I hadn't been apart much since we'd met, and my energy was completely focused on him as the door slid open to the huge training area where men and women were paired off, sparring with each other. Gaige turned his head in my direction and Farber—the person he was practicing with—landed a blow to the left side of Gaige's face.

"Gaige!" Farber and I yelled at the same time.

I ran over to Gaige as Farber reached down to help him off the ground.

"What happened!" Farber said.

"I think *I* happened." I grabbed Gaige's other arm to help. "Sorry, Gaige."

"That's okay." Gaige put a hand to the side of his face, just under his eye, where a bruise had already started to form. "That's what I get for letting myself be distracted." He smiled and gave me a kiss on the cheek. "Even by you."

Byrne scurried up next to Farber. "What'd you do?"

Farber's thin frame stood several inches above Byrne's more stocky build. "I hit him."

"It's all right, Byrne," Gaige said. "We were demonstrating defensive moves. I obviously didn't defend." Gaige glanced across the room and made eye contact with Conner.

## The Anuan Mission

Conner nodded his head. “Okay everybody, let’s call it a day. Be back here first thing tomorrow.”

The ground team, including the new recruits, scattered. With only me, Gaige, and Conner—who was still gathering his things—left in the room, I wasn’t worried about embarrassing Gaige. I pulled Gaige’s hand from his face. A small cut surrounded by a reddish-purple bruise lay just under his left eye.

“It’ll be fine,” Gaige said.

“Then why were you still holding it? Just stand still.” I went to the constructor cubby on the side of the room and ordered hydrogen peroxide and cotton balls.

“I didn’t expect you so early,” Gaige said. “Everything go okay with the Council?”

“The Councilors were confused about something I told them. They wanted to meditate on it, but I’ll go back tomorrow.” I approached Gaige with my first aid supplies.

“Okay. What do you have?” Gaige said, eyeing the items in my hand.

“This will help clean your cut.” I dipped a cotton ball in the small, glass container of peroxide and dabbed it on Gaige’s cut.

Gaige sucked air between his teeth. “Primitive,” he said, half smiling and half grimacing.

“Huh?” I looked at the saturated cotton in my hand and thought of the healing beams in sickbay. I doubted then that the Anuans had used simple hydrogen peroxide in decades, maybe even centuries. “Oh, I guess maybe it would be primitive here. But it works. Now quit being a baby.”

“Baby? You’re torturing me with your twenty-first century Earth medical techniques. I’m allowed.” Still grimacing, he glanced over my shoulder at Conner.

Only then did I notice the tension in the room. I lowered my hand from Gaige's cut. "What's going on?"

Conner came up to me and took the dish of peroxide and the cotton balls from my hands. "He can have Zada look at that later. Right now, Gaige needs to talk to you about something."

"Gaige? What is it?"

"Computer, seating for three. Let's sit," Gaige said.

A long, sleek bench—the same glassy, white color as the rest of the room—flipped from the wall near us. The three of us sat down, with Gaige in the middle. He turned slightly toward me and put a hand on my knee.

"What's this all about?" I asked.

"We found out some information in our meeting this morning. It's something that involves you. Our could involve you, if you agree to it."

"Agree to what? Just tell me, Gaige."

"There are several . . . *many* sites in the United States that the Council can't quite get a feel about. One of those sites is where the government personnel who were pursuing us went." He absently raised a hand to the scar on his neck. "We know the Tamanacke were connected to those people and were likely at that site. Since the Council, well nobody really . . . almost nobody, can sense the Tamanacke, the Council figures that the Tamanacke are also connected to the rest of the sites. And that's why they haven't been able to read those areas."

Nobody . . . *almost* nobody. *Except me.* "I see." I pulled Gaige's hand away from his neck and held it in my lap. "The Anuans must be wondering what the Tamanacke are doing. How many there are. If they're a threat."



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Gaige looked down at our clasped hands and nodded. “They are.”

Conner nodded as well, but he looked me straight in the eyes. Conner saw my abilities through the lens of a cousin, not a husband who always wanted to protect me.

“If they need my help, I’ll do it.”

Gaige lifted his head. “Even after you saw them kill your parents?”

“What?” Conner’s voice rose from behind Gaige. “Your parents were killed in a robbery attempt, weren’t they? Dad never told me about any Tamanacke being involved.”

“Tas doesn’t know yet,” Gaige said. “She only saw the vision after we arrived on-planet. We’re planning on seeing your dad next, to tell him about it.”

“Oh, shit. He’s not going to take that well. Victoria, you *saw* it happen?”

“Saw, heard, felt . . .”

“Oh, man.” Conner shook his head. “I’m so sorry, Victoria. Maybe you should think about whether you’d really be up to helping them with the Tamanacke, considering . . .”

I couldn’t put time into *thinking*. If I thought too much about seeing those monsters again, I’d want to run and hide in a corner somewhere. I couldn’t do that. I had a gift, and if that gift could help keep the Tamanacke from hurting someone else, I couldn’t let my fear take that away. “Thank you, Conner. I’ll be fine.” I stood up and tugged at Gaige’s arm. “Let’s go. You can come too, Conner. We’ll tell Tas that I’ll help, and we’ll tell him about how his sister really died. We need to move forward with whatever has to be done.”

Traci Ison Schafer

“You’re sure?” Gaige asked, though we were all already walking toward the door.

“I’m positive. I have abilities no one else has. If I can use them to help, I will. No matter what.”

Gaige let out a groan. “That’s what I’m afraid of . . .”

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## 11 - GAIGE

Victoria stopped in the middle of the corridor. “Do you hear that?”

Conner tilted his head. “I don’t hear anything.”

“I don’t either,” I said.

“Wait.” Victoria held her hands out, blocking our path toward Tas’s planning room. “There it is again, steady now.”

I held my breath, so not even the sound of my breathing would interfere with any noises nearby, and listened. “No, I still don’t hear anything.”

“That same hum I heard in the vision I had on the cliff. No.” She held up a finger. “Not steady, more like an *in* and an *out*. Like . . . breathing. It’s not, though. It’s more mechanical than that.”

“Sorry,” Conner said. “I don’t hear anything.”

“Do *not* overwhelm me!” Victoria said, pointing her finger in the air.

“Overwhelm you?” Conner said. “I’ve barely spoken.”

Victoria dropped her hand to her side. “Oh. Sorry, Conner. I wasn’t talking to you. Or Gaige. I was talking to my vision or what was about to be a vision. The Council said I could take control over them. I guess I did. The sound is completely gone now. Maybe I shouldn’t be as forceful next time.”

“No,” I said. “After what I saw you go through with the previous visions, it’s good that you can send them away.”

“That might have just been a coincidence. We’ll have to see.”

Victoria started walking again like she didn’t have a care in the world. She did. She’d pushed it deep, though. *Very* deep. But I could still feel a whisper of it. She didn’t want to see the Tamanacke any more than I did. I had to try and respect her wishes to help, though. It was her decision, after all, whether I liked it or not. And I didn’t like it one bit.

We arrived at Tas’s planning room and requested entry. Tas would be anxious to hear what Victoria had decided. He had the same reservations about her getting involved as I did. He also had enough history with the Tamanacke to know that, perhaps, the risk was necessary. I supposed down deep, I knew that too.

“Entry granted,” the computer said, and the door slid open.

Brian was with Tas, and the two peered at us through an image they’d been looking at. Tas swiped a control light illuminated next to him, and the image disappeared.

“We’ve explained things to Victoria,” I said.

Tas nodded. “Do you have an answer for us, Victoria?”

“I do. There’s something else as well.”

“Hmm. I sense as much,” Tas said. “Let’s sit down.”

Brian collected a pile of items from Tas’s large planning table. “I’ll just get out of your way. Thanks for the lesson, Tas. I appreciate it.”

Victoria blew out a long breath and inhaled deeply, then blew out another long breath.

“What’s wrong?” I asked

“Something’s . . . happening . . .”

## The Anuan Mission

“What is it?” Tas took Victoria by the arm and helped her into a chair.

“I hear it again. The *in*. The *out*. Like breathing. But mechanical . . .”

“Breathing machines?” Brian sat his items back down on the table as if he’d lost muscle control in his arms.

“Yes! That’s it!” Victoria said. “Breathing machines! A vision is coming on . . . strong . . . overwhelming. It’s not listening to me. I can’t control it.”

I knelt down next to her chair. “It’s okay. We’re all right here with you.”

“I see the same dark place I saw before. I’m trying to stay with you, but it’s pulling at me . . . It’s time . . . It’s time.” Victoria’s eyes rolled back, and she collapsed over the side of the chair.

“Zada!” I shouted into my communication link while Tas supported Victoria’s head.

“Open com to Gaige’s link!” Tas, one of the few on board with that authority, yelled.

Zada’s response boomed into the room. “Our monitors picked it up, Gaige. She’s in some kind of trance state, like she’s having one massive vision. Just place her on her side on the floor, if she’s not already, and stay with her. I’ll be right there.”

Conner, Tas, Brian, and I all gingerly lifted Victoria from the chair and quickly moved her onto the floor.

Every muscle of Victoria’s body twitched. I sat close, ready to buffer her if she thrashed toward anything. The whites of her eyes showed under her flickering lids, and she mumbled something I didn’t understand.

Zada rushed in and waved a medical wand over Victoria. “Her heart rate and blood pressure are elevated. Not enough to be

concerned, but her brain activity . . . I think it could cause damage if we try to—”

“Wake them.” Victoria said then went very still.

Zada looked down at the readouts on her medical device. “She’s going into shock!”

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## 12 - LOME

With Cruck by my side, I entered the musty room that contained the suspension chambers. The room lay so deep in the bowels of our underground compound that even I, after all these years of getting used to our confinement, felt smothered coming here. But I wanted to give the order personally.

Celit stepped aside and bowed as we entered. “Candar Lome, welcome.”

“Status,” I demanded.

Celit raised her eyes, but her head stayed lowered. “All vital signs are steady, though weak in this state, as you know. They’ve already had this morning’s muscle stimulations. Only negligible degradation has been recorded over their time here.”

“Look at them, Cruck,” I said, staring through the glass pods. “*They* are the key to the success of our revenge.”

“They don’t look like much to me, Lome.” Cruck’s nostril slits pinched closed. “Ugly creatures.”

“I don’t care what they look like as long as they serve my purpose.”

Cruck leaned down only an inch or so away from one of the glass pods. “I don’t see how these hideous things are going to be of any use in conquering the Anuans.”

“Of course you don’t. You think like a Tamanacke. Your honor as a warrior would not allow such weakness as this. But the Anuans—they are compelled to help even the smallest, most insignificant among them. At any cost. Our victory over them will be that cost.”

Cruck stood with a snarl of disgust on his face. “I cannot comprehend losing focus on the honor of victory for this.” He waved toward the pods.

“Our army has regained its numbers. Young and inexperienced, yes. But with my leadership, we will conquer those murderers. All we need now is bait. Celit!”

Celit knelt on one knee in front of me. “Yes, Candar.”

“It’s time. Wake them.”



## 13 - VICTORIA

I opened my eyes to Gaige, Conner, Tas, Brian, and Zada staring down at me.

“Victoria?” Gaige said.

I felt like I’d been put through a blender then mashed back together. “Where am I? What happened?” I tried to tell my body to sit up, but the body wasn’t obeying the brain.

“We’re still in Tas’s planning room,” Gaige said. “Just lie still.”

“Yeah.” I stopped trying to get my body to cooperate and let my muscles relax. “I’m not sure I have a choice.”

“You went into another vision state.” Zada, squatting next to me, scanned me with her medical wand. “This one was much more intense than the one you had on the cliff. Your systems are weak but undamaged.” Zada placed the device on the floor. “Do you remember what you saw?”

“No . . . maybe . . .” Tas’s planning room faded in and out. “I think something *is* coming back to me . . .” As exhausted as I was, I concentrated hard to stay grounded in my physical surroundings. The vision began to come back, but it didn’t take me away like before. “I’m in a room in the same dreary, cave-like place that I was during my vision on the cliff. I feel like it’s present, or very, very recent past. I’m seeing things from a different perspective

than before, though. Three Tamanacke are looking down on me. Like you all are now. Their intentions are . . . *bad* . . . vengeance.” My blood ran cold. I reached for Gaige’s hand and squeezed, determined to stay with him *and* stay with the vision. Something needed to be revealed, and *I* was the vessel to reveal it.

*“Hello there, Ms. Spencer. Did you sleep well?”*

“They know my name.”

*“I’m afraid your life as an Earthling is over. We know who you really are.”*

“They know who I really am and that I’m not a true Earthling.”

*“But, Anu . . . Well, you can let go of the hope that you’ll one day live a peaceful existence on Anu again. I’m sure Tas and those other inept Anuans will be all too happy to try and bring his little sister home. But we’ll be waiting for them.”*

My throat tightened. I repeated the words over and over in my head, hoping I’d misunderstood something or was connecting the relationships incorrectly. “I’m Tas’s niece. I’m his niece.”

“Yes. You’re my niece,” Tas said.

“They’re not talking to me, Tas’s niece. They’re talking to his *sister*.”

Tas’s body stiffened. “The Tamanacke had contact with Tessy?” Then the color drained from his face. “Wait, you said this was present or very recent past.”

As hard as it was to believe, I couldn’t deny what my vision had told me. “I did. And it is. She’s alive, Tas! My mother is alive. And they’re going to use her as bait.”

## 14 - TAS

After talking with the Council, the War Forces' commander, and Victoria's paternal uncle on Earth, I now rejoined the others in my planning room. Victoria lay on a bed that extended from the wall, with Gaige sitting next to her. Brian and Conner talked quietly at the planning table.

"How are you feeling now, Victoria?" I asked.

Victoria turned onto her side to face my direction. "Feeling better . . . physically, anyway. Getting stronger. The rest . . . I don't know. The shock hasn't quite worn off."

"I understand. Your Councilors are on standby to see us whenever you feel strong enough. I've spoken with your adoptive father, Michael. They never saw your parents' bodies. The government took it upon themselves to have them cremated—or so they said—before he arrived in Nevada. The government told them those were your parents' wishes. He was upset about it at the time, feeling that that wasn't the government's place, but he could do nothing after the fact. I recall learning they had been cremated, but I never got into the details of how that came to be. Our concern then was focused on arrangements for your care."

"I'm sorry, Tas," Victoria said. "Thinking back now, I realize I didn't actually see their deaths in my vision. If I had realized they hadn't died . . ." Victoria's essence waffled from heartsick to

guilt to helplessness. “Regardless, we should have told you about my vision immediately.”

“It’s okay, Victoria,” I said. “We’ll sort this out.”

“I’m not sure there’s anything to sort out,” Gaige said. “Don’t you feel Tessy now? I do. More than the life echo I’ve felt of her all these years. Or what I *thought* was her life echo.”

I felt her, too, which meant I’d left her in the hands of the Tamanacke all these years. “Yes, Gaige, of course I feel her! And it’s all I can do to keep from taking over the bridge of this ship and going straight to Earth to get her back. But that wouldn’t be the smartest or most successful way to approach this!”

All the eyes in the room turned to me. I clenched my fists and took a breath. Exhaling, I relaxed my hands but felt only slightly more in control than I had been when I snapped at Gaige. “I’m sorry, Gaige. I’m just trying to figure out what happened . . . how we all missed this. That’s all. The Council will help. I’ve already contacted the War Forces’ commander to let them know the situation. I’ll meet with them right after we meet with the Council. We will get my sister and her husband back—there’s no doubt about that. But we can’t go running at this blindly.”

“I’ll help with that—the blindly part. I’ll help us see them,” Victoria said. “Now more than ever, I know I’m needed.”

Gaige dropped his head and stayed silent. Conner and Brian hadn’t said a word. What could they say? They had the least knowledge about the history of either the Tamanacke or the loss of my sister. Or what to do about getting her back.

“Maybe I should go now.” Brian stood up and walked over to Victoria. “If you need anything . . .” He patted her arm and scanned the room. “If *any* of you need anything, just let me know. I’d be glad to help . . . *if* there’s any way I can.” Brian’s sadness

## The Anuan Mission

went deep, perhaps deeper than even the current situation, and he was sincere about helping—I could feel that—but what could this Kian do?

“Thank you, Brian,” I walked him to the door. “We appreciate the offer. We’ll let you know if there’s anything.”

Brian started to say something but just nodded instead and left.

Victoria sat up with some assistance from Gaige. “I’d like to go talk with the Council now, if everybody else is ready.”

I was more than ready. I linked to Daigon to tell him to join us. If we were about to engage with the Tamanacke—and we were—we’d need him.

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For our convenience, Victoria’s Councilors had come to the ship’s Council Hall and were waiting for us. Daigon arrived just as Victoria, Gaige, Conner, and I did. I hadn’t had time to brief Daigon, but he had to know.

“You feel her too, don’t you?” I asked him.

“Tessy. Yes, I feel her. I assume that’s the reason for this meeting?”

“Yes.” There was no doubt in my mind that Tessy was alive, but I needed as much information about what happened as I could get before meeting with the War Forces’ commander. “We’re ready to start, Denia.”

Everyone sat in a circle. The Councilors completely blocked their emotions, and nothing in their faces or postures exposed what they felt.

“Welcome,” Denia said. “We realize there are circumstances that must be dealt with.”

“So, you confirm what we discussed and what the rest of us already feel—my sister and her husband are alive?”

“They are,” Denia confirmed. “We feel them without a doubt. Victoria, the situation the Council needed to meditate on was your mother. When you told us you saw the vision of your parents’ deaths from your mother’s point of view, we knew what that meant. You see, one with exceptional abilities can experience any vision from an omniscient perspective, but to see a vision from another’s point of view, the energy of the vision must come through that person. This can only be accomplished if they are living at the time of the vision. Since your skills are unpolished, we wondered if, perhaps, you could have just misinterpreted. However, we meditated as a collective, combining all our energies, and could discern a minute difference between the energy we felt from your mother and what would be considered only her life echo.” She paused and looked at me, then Victoria, then back at me. “It was very difficult to detect. Beyond anything an average Anuan, even one close to Tessy, would have been able to discern. Or an Anuan above average in abilities, if those abilities were still unfamiliar. Do not hold this against yourselves. There is *no way* you could have known. We, the most metaphysically skilled of all Anuans, did not realize.”

“Why weren’t we,” I swept my hand toward everyone around the circle, “*any of us*, able to feel her? What did they do to them?”

Victoria spoke up then. “I think they’ve had them in some kind of suspended state. Not dead, but as close as they could get them without actually killing them. Would that make sense, Denia?”

“Yes, that is likely the case.”

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“I’m told you were going to help me with the Tamanacke, right?” Victoria said. “And now, you’ll help me find my parents, help us get them back?”

“We will,” Denia said. “We have notified the Anuan Council in its entirety. A rescue mission will be fully supported.”

That’s all I needed to hear. The Council supported a rescue mission. I couldn’t imagine the War Forces wouldn’t also. I stood and bowed my head briefly to Denia. “Thank you, Denia, Council. I’ll contact you again after I’ve spoken with Commander Paser of the War Forces. We *will* bring my sister home.”

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## 15 - TAS

I stared out the window of my quarters on Mission Earth, remembering the day Tessy's routine peacewalker mission took a turn nobody expected.

*"Transitioning," Rusa said from behind the x-tran controller.*

*Tessy's form appeared transparent at first then gradually solidified.*

*"Transition complete. Hey, Tessy."*

*"Hey, Rusa. And hey to you, big brother."*

*I took Tessy's hand as she stepped off the transition platform.*

*"What's this about?"*

*"What? A girl can't visit her brother?" Tessy wrapped her arm around mine as we left x-tran.*

*"A girl can visit her brother, but this girl has something else on her mind."*

*"You read me too well, Tas." She patted my arm. "I do want to talk to you about something. Let's wait until we get to your quarters."*

*Neither of us spoke on the way to my quarters. Our thoughts were too muddled. I could tell from her emotional state that she didn't look forward to telling me whatever it was she had to say. And I didn't look forward to hearing it.*



## The Anuan Mission

*Bec greeted us at the door with a hug for Tessy. “Tessy, I didn’t expect you to be visiting the ship today. How are things going on Earth?”*

*“Good. Really good.”*

*“Oh . . . no.” Bec’s smile drooped, but she quickly propped it back up. “I mean, that’s great!”*

*“What is it, Bec?” I said.*

*Tessy took Bec’s hands in hers. “A girl can tell, I guess. Even one without Anuan abilities.”*

*“It’s obvious.” Bec squeezed Tessy’s hands. “I’m happy for you.”*

*“Does somebody want to fill me in?”*

*“Look in the eyes, Tas.” Bec released Tessy’s hands and turned me and Tessy toward each other. “Your little sister is in love.”*

*“In love? With whom? No! Not a Kian? Please tell me he’s not a Kian.”*

*Tessy shrugged. “He’s a Kian.”*

*“Tessy, no! How could this happen? You can’t fall in love with a Kian!”*

*Bec cleared her throat. “What’s wrong with falling in love with a Kian?”*

*My beautiful Kian wife batted her cinnamon eyelashes at me.*

*“Nothing. Nothing’s wrong with falling in love with a Kian. But she’s on a mission, Bec.”*

*Bec put her hands on her hips. “Mm-hmm. And?”*

*Tessy smiled, crossed her arms, and tapped her foot on the floor, obviously waiting for the next hypocritical words to fall out of my mouth.*

*I rolled my eyes. "Okay. Fine. It can happen. But what are you going to do about it?"*

*Tessy moved closer to me and took my hands in hers. "I love you, Tas. You know that."*

*"Yes, I know. And I love you too."*

*"I know."*

*"But." I said, bracing myself for what I knew was coming.*

*"But, he's asked me to marry him. I want to stay on Earth and be with him."*

*"He can come to Anu. We can talk to the Council. I'll go with you."*

*"No, Tas. I want to stay on Earth." Tessy touched my cheek. "Don't look so glum. He makes me happy. And I'll visit when the ship's here for missions. We'll see each other again."*

"Daigon Ardessa requesting entry," the computer said, pulling me away from my memories.

"Yes, we will see each other again. You can count on that, little sister."

"Daigon Ardessa requesting entry," the computer repeated. "Awaiting response."

"Yes. Yes. Let him in."

Daigon entered, his usual, blank expression melting as the door closed behind him. "I'm so sorry, Tas. We'll get her back."

"Damn right we will."

Daigon sat down next to me but didn't say a word. Just his presence helped me feel . . . not quite as lost.

"I didn't protect her, Daigon."

"It was her choice to stay on Earth. You can't blame yourself for that."

"I should have stopped her from staying with him."

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Daigon chuckled. “Are we talking about the same person? Because the Tessy I knew had a pretty strong mind of her own and a will to match it.”

Just thinking of my sister’s fiery spirit made me laugh too. “She *was* pretty thick-headed.” I stood up, not sure whether to laugh or cry anymore. “Damn it! I should have tried harder to keep her from staying on Earth permanently.”

Daigon looked up with a smile on his face. “Nah. You’d have lost that battle. Tessy got her way with you every time.”

“I *will* get her back, Daigon. No matter what I have to do. I *have* to make this right.”

## 16 - VICTORIA

I needed some time to myself, and since I'd be leaving Anu all too soon, decided to spend that time connecting with my new planet.

The rhythmic rolling and crashing of the waves on our beach helped calm me after what I'd learned. My parents were alive. After all these years, I'd have them back in my life. *Hopefully*. Such a strange thought, reclaiming ghosts. Though they hadn't really been ghosts after all.

I reached down and picked up an odd, bumpy shell, it's maroon color turning to blue near the edges. I dusted off the sand and put it in my bag. The shell clanked against dozens of others. Some of Anu's shells were vaguely similar to those I'd collected on Florida beaches, and others weren't anything close. I lifted the bag, trying to judge its weight, but my brain wasn't up for the task. Gaige's essence pulled at me from our place overlooking the beach—the bag was full enough.

As I walked back up the beach, the torrent of emotions running through Gaige penetrated me even more—his worry about my pending exposure to the Tamanacke; his struggle coming to terms with his own incident involving them; but foremost, the heartbreak over my mother being held captive all these years. Not knowing that time in their lives, I sometimes forgot that Gaige had known and loved my mother too.

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When I walked through the door to our place, a shirtless Gaige stood staring out the window. I watched him, remembering the first time I ever saw him. The strong square jawline covered in dark, evening shadow, the razor-sharp nose, the tan skin, and the dimples that could melt a girl's heart, or at least mine. He had a face that could have belonged to any Earthling but didn't. This human was from another planet. My planet now. Anu. I cherished every second with him since the day the Universe crossed our paths.

"Something interesting out there?" I asked.

He looked over his shoulder with the slightest mischievous grin on his face. "Mm-hmm. This girl, well, woman, picking up shells. She's doing it—or *was* doing it, but she's gone now—in the most studious way. Picking up, examining, collecting. Then she took her stash and left. Shame, she was pretty. I could have watched her all day. Peculiar girl, though. The only one on the entire beach wearing any clothing." The grin morphed into a dimpled smile, and he turned completely around and looked at the bag in my hands.

"Well, maybe you can catch her another time down there without the clothing," I said.

"Definitely. As soon as we get back home." His dimples melted away, and I could feel his anxiety.

"We'll be back." I dropped my bag on the table, went to him, and kissed him on his cheek. Then his neck, his ear, his lips. "Now, we have some unfinished business to take care of."

"Unfinished business?"

"I know it's been a long day." I ran a finger down his bare chest, lingering playfully at the top of the waistband of his pants.

“But I recall giving you a kiss in front of the Great Council Hall to hold you over until we got home tonight.”

“Mm-hmm. I definitely remember.” Grinning, he placed his hand on the small of my back and pulled me closer. “And we *are* home now.”

“Yes, we are.” I pushed away the thought that this could be our last night in our home, at least for a while. There was no room for thoughts like that at the moment.

He kissed me, already lost in *us*. We didn’t even make it to the bed, but made love right there on the floor underneath the wall of windows.

After we’d cuddled on the floor until the sky had turned dark and filled with stars, we decided to move to the bed. Gaige stopped at the table and peeked into my bag of shells. “What are you going to do with these?”

So as not to break any of the shells, I gently emptied the bag onto the table. “Well, look at them, for one.” I spread the shells out into a single layer. “Besides that . . .” I shrugged. “I guess I’m not sure. Make a lamp out of them?”

“That’s one idea. It would probably be the first lamp on this planet in hundreds of years.” He laughed a small, empty laugh.

“This glowing wall, floor, ceiling thing the Anuans have *is* pretty efficient.” I picked up a shell, examined it, and then laid it back onto the table. “Well, I’ll think of something.”

The path that lay ahead of us pulled me back to the window, and I placed my hand on the glass, feeling for my old world, a world I’d soon be revisiting. “Can we see it from here? Earth’s star, I mean?”

## The Anuan Mission

He looked to the left, then the right, then higher in the sky directly in front of us. “We can’t see it right now. It should be visible later tonight.”

“I can feel my parents so clearly now. Why didn’t—”

Gaige placed his finger on my mouth. “Shhh,” he whispered. “You heard the Council. You couldn’t have known. None of us could have.”

“I’ll keep reminding myself of that.” I stared out into the darkness, feeling my parents, my old home, everything I’d left behind. “I can feel my aunt and uncle too.” I let my hand drop from the window. “Do they know yet?”

“Since Tas has been in contact with your uncle, I’d say he probably told them everything.”

“Dad . . . I mean Uncle Mike will be shocked to know his brother is still alive.”

“You don’t have to correct yourself. Not with me. I know who they are, and who they are in your heart. They raised you; they earned the title of parents. Your natural parents would understand, *will* understand. It doesn’t mean you love Tessy and Robert any less or that you betrayed their memory, or what you *thought* was their memory, in any way.”

“You’re right. I love them all. The Tamanacke can’t take that away—”

It suddenly occurred to me that the Tamanacke may know who my aunt and uncle were—my *unprotected* aunt and uncle. “Gaige, do you think my aunt and uncle are safe? From the Tamanacke, I mean. If the Tamanacke knew who I was, won’t they know who raised me and where to find them?”

“You don’t have to worry. We’ve already thought of that. The same surveillance we had on you and the remote weapons we had

poised to protect you, we now have on them. We won't let anybody, Tamanacke or otherwise, hurt them. I didn't say anything because I didn't want you to consider the possibility, but since you already have . . . We think it's unlikely the Tamanacke would bother them, since they're not Anuans, but we have the equipment in place, and it was no extra effort to take the precaution."

"Thank you, Gaige. If only the Anuans had those technologies in place when my mother and the rest of the peacewalkers were on Earth . . ." But they hadn't, and all the wishing in the world wouldn't change that nor would it change the potentially dangerous mission ahead of us. I leaned my head against Gaige's chest, so tired I could barely keep my eyes open. But I fought the fatigue because it would be a long time before I'd spend another evening on Anu. If I ever did.



## 17 - BRIAN

I dropped into the chair by the space-view window and picked up the wallet-sized photo lying on the table to my right. My boy's sweet, innocent face smiled up at me.

“Hi, buddy.”

In an instant, I was back in that hospital room, breathing machines puffing away and every kind of tube imaginable coming out of his little body. His hand in mine, warm but so fragile, so lifeless. The promise I'd made to him echoed in my mind. *I'll never have another gun in the house, will never even touch one again.*

I laid the photo back on the table and walked to the constructor. “United States military 9-millimeter Beretta, semi-automatic pistol. Circa 1990s.”

The gun slowly materialized. When it had turned solid, all I could do at first was stare at the cold, black metal, so benign yet with the potential to be so damn deadly. My heart raced at the mere sight of it. Could I do it? Could I touch another gun after the promise I'd made? Then I reminded myself what the Anuans were about to take on—those huge beasts they called Tamanacke, probably the US Government too—and reached in to pick up the gun.

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I turned it in one direction then another. It still looked exactly how I remembered it. I gripped it in my hand. Still felt the same too. Like an extension of my own body. Just as familiar as the day I'd last touched one. The day I'd brought it back from the range and prepared to clean it before I put it away. The day I'd heard my wife scream for help from the kitchen, the smoke alarm blaring. The day I'd dropped the gun and left it—unattended and unsecured—on the bed to put out the fire on the stove. The day that changed my life, and my boy's life, forever . . .

I shook my head and wiped the tears from my face. "I'm so sorry, buddy. But I have to help them. If I can."

## 18 - GAIGE

Victoria sat down on the ground, far enough away from Mission Earth to be free of its shadow, and stared out over the city of Nikkoa, ignoring the three warships hovering high above us.

“You sure you don’t want a blanket to sit on?” I asked.

“No, I want to be as close to the planet as I can.”

I squatted, plucked a sprig of asper from the ground, and placed it in Victoria’s hand. “We’ll be back.”

“Yes, we will.” She closed her fingers around the tiny, floral ground covering and lay back, looking straight up at the huge, dark gray warships—a scary sight to anyone not familiar with them. “I thought Anuans were peaceful beings?”

I lay down next to her. “We are. Unfortunately, not every other being is.”

“What are the warships capable of?”

“One of them could obliterate a planet the size of Earth.”

“I hope that’s not the plan,” she said, her eyes staying fixed on the ships.

“No. That’s not the plan. It will be a rescue mission. The War Forces will get your parents, and we’ll all come back to Anu. They don’t plan to engage the Tamanacke unless they’re forced to.”

“The Tamanacke won’t just hand them over.”

“No, probably not.”

We lay in silence then, waiting for Tas, my father, and a few others on Mission Earth to make the last of their preparations before being transitioned to the warships. Since both Tas and my father had war experience with the Tamanacke, Tas would be joint commander of the mission, and my father would be an advisor. Brian, who was familiar with some of the secret government facilities, would also go along as advisor. The Mission Earth ground teams wouldn't have the proper training for the kind of mission we were about to embark on, but a few people, including Conner, wanted to try out for the team or at least serve in support functions. They were very loyal to Tas. They knew this was personal for him, so it was personal for them too. Even Zada, having served on Mission Earth with Tas for several years and being most familiar with Victoria's medical history, had asked to be a part of the support team.

Victoria sat up and squinted against the sun. "What will I say to them after all these years? They won't know all this time has passed. I'm not four years old anymore. Will they even recognize me at this age? I may be a stranger to them. They may be strangers to me."

I sat up as well and put my hand on her thigh. "There will be an adjustment period, but they will still love you. At any age."

"I'm getting ahead of myself. We have to get my parents back first."

"We *will* get them back, Victoria. You need to keep your intentions positive."

"I know. But don't kid yourself. Since they're likely too deep in the compound for your transition process to work, this isn't going to be easy."

"No, it's not."

## The Anuan Mission

*“Gaige,” my father’s voice resonated in my ear. “Everyone else has now boarded. We’re ready to transition you and Victoria to the Callon.”*

I stood and reached a hand down to help Victoria up. “They’re ready for us.”

She took my hand and pulled herself to her feet. After taking a long look toward Nikkoa, she nodded. “I’m ready.”

“Two to transition,” I said.

Our Anuan surroundings faded, and the warship we’d been transitioned to formed around us.

“Welcome to the Callon.” A young woman looked up at us from her console. “I’m Pia, and this will be your home for the next four months. Plus however long the ground mission takes.”

“One way only takes two months?” Victoria didn’t give Pia time to answer. “That’s a lot faster than it took us to get from Earth to Anu on Mission Earth.”

“Warships are capable of much higher speeds than science vessels like your Mission Earth. Mission Earth is still a good, solid ship though.” Pia blinked, her long, black bangs touching her eyelashes. “All the support members are being housed on this ship. We won’t engage in the actual mission unless we have to. That will be accomplished by the lead warship, Altron, with warship Baylon acting as backup. Ensign Sayaire will show you to your quarters.”

The officer standing next to her stepped forward. “Please, follow me.”

Ensign Sayaire led us through several corridors, up the ibbs, and down another long corridor before stopping. “This will be your quarters during the mission. Please stand right there for a

moment.” Sayaire held his hand over a panel next to the door. “Computer, scan subjects for entry access.”

“Verifying credentials,” the computer said. “Verified. Scanning . . . scan complete. Entry access established.”

The doors opened, and we all entered. Sayaire waved a hand in this direction then another as he showed us the room. “The quarters are similar to any other ship. The com systems are the same too, so if you have any questions or need anything, you can link to the computer or any member on board. Your personal items will be transitioned to your quarters shortly.”

“Personal items?” I looked to Victoria. “We’re not bringing any personal items.”

Victoria held up her hand. “Um, that would be me.”

“Oh, okay,” I said, wondering what Victoria could have possibly needed to bring with her. “Well, thank you, Ensign Sayaire.”

“You’re welcome, sir.” Sayaire gave us a polite nod and left the room.

Sensing the turmoil in Victoria’s emotions, I waited for the doors to close before speaking to her. “You know, you can order everything you need from the constructor.”

“Not everything.” Victoria went straight to the window without saying another word.

Though curious, I didn’t press her about what she was bringing. I quietly stood beside her and let her deal with leaving however she needed to.

The tone sounded for takeoff, and we lifted from the docking station. Within seconds, we’d cleared Anu’s atmosphere and accelerated. Once we reached the edge of our solar system, we’d accelerate even more—to well beyond light speed.

## The Anuan Mission

“Taking off doesn’t jerk you as much as you would think.” Victoria placed a clenched hand against the window. “Gone, just like that. Seems like I’m saying goodbye a lot lately. First to Earth, now to Anu.”

“We’ll be back soon,” I said. “With your parents.”

“I hope so.” Victoria removed her fist from the window.

“Intentions, Victoria.”

“You’re right. We’ll bring them home. I’m just having trouble wrapping my head around all this. I mean I know, better than anybody, that it’s true . . . my parents are alive. But there’s also the Tamanacke to consider. It’s hard to be happy with that thought looming over us.”

I opened her clenched hand to kiss her palm, but the little sprig of asper lay there. I reclosed her fist, leaving her tiny piece of Anu safe and snug, and kissed her knuckles instead. “I understand.” *Better than most.* Within a couple months, Earth would come into view, and the mission teams would have to be ready to face creatures most of them had only heard about from stories. They had no idea yet what they would be facing. But I did. And, may the Universe help them.

The constructor beeped with an incoming transition. I turned just in time to see a small basket of shells appear. Another piece of Anu coming along for the mission.

## 19 - VICTORIA

“I’ll be leaving soon,” Gaige called out.

I rolled onto my back, rubbed my eyes, and opened them to the dim lighting. “The sun . . . well, the *simulated* sun hasn’t even risen yet.”

“The team’s anxious to get started. They want to have a good workout before meeting with the War Forces’ leads tomorrow.” Gaige ordered his flight suit from the constructor and pulled it on.

“You think anybody from Mission Earth will make the team?”

“I think some will. They’re from a science vessel but go through pretty solid physical training. It’s the mindset they’ll need to work on. They’re not used to offensive strategies. If they can’t get that and integrate seamlessly into the mission team, they won’t be going on the mission. Tas has made that very clear.” Gaige pressed the hidden closure on the front of his flight suit then leaned over me. “You need anything before I go? You remember how to get to the ship’s Council Hall, right?”

“Yes, I’m fine. I remember where it is.”

“Okay. Have a good session with the Council.” He gave me a quick kiss on the lips. “See you later today.”

When Gaige had cleared the door, I closed my eyes, but it was too late. Sleep had left me to the gradually increasing light of the morning. I pushed my covers back, got out of bed, and sat down



## The Anuan Mission

at our meal table. I still had plenty of time before my session, so I ordered a breakfast of scrambled eggs, toast, and orange juice. Taking a bite of the egg, I tried to detect any subtle differences between constructed eggs and the real eggs I'd been used to on Earth. I couldn't. Technically, there was no difference, so I don't know why I continued to try and find any. Still amazed at the technology, I supposed.

While I ate, I admired the basket of Anuan shells sitting in the center of the table. I pulled out a more colorful one—an iridescent purple—and examined it, running my fingers across the ridges of its top, holding it up to see if light could penetrate its thickness. It couldn't. I held it to my nose, closed my eyes, and inhaled. The salty scent brought Sarrin to my mind. But the smell of my eggs brought me right back to our mission quarters. I opened my eyes and with a sigh dropped the shell back into the basket.

When I finished my meal, I walked over to the constructor in the front wall and disposed of my plate and glass. “Computer recycle then give me a color chart.”

The dishes disappeared, then a spray of colors beamed from the constructor. I ran my hand through it, each color shooting out against the opposite wall when my fingers came in contact with it. When I reached a particularly bright shade of yellow orange, I stopped. “Pretty. And bright. I could use that today, computer. Give me a ship suit in this color. Do you have my clothing specifications?”

“Yes,” the computer answered. “Including selected medical devices.”

I rolled my eyes. The monitors had come in handy, so I wouldn't push back on them quite yet. Having them kept Gaige and Zada happy. One of the few things within my control lately.

The computer materialized a soft, yellow-orange ship suit. I pulled it on. “Well, computer, I guess it’s time to get started.”

“Please specify what you would like to initiate.”

“Oh. Nothing, computer. This one’s all on me.”

Still having a few minutes to kill, I left our quarters and took my time getting to the ship’s Council Hall. Denia, Galaird, Jahnay, and Roccold all greeted me when I arrived, and we settled into our circle of floating chairs. The walls of this Council Hall weren’t one-way glass like the one in the city, but the softly glowing walls of the ship were soothing. Something I appreciated at that moment.

“Have you found your quarters suitable, Victoria?” Denia asked.

“Yes, they’re similar to those on Mission Earth. They’re very comfortable.” Only these quarters hadn’t been transformed into an exact replica of my Earth bedroom to make me feel more comfortable. I didn’t need that anymore.

“Very well. Let us begin. We realize you have been through a traumatic experience, are still going through it. Learning your parents are alive, that they need help, that *you* can help them. And all this very shortly after you were asked to assist in determining the numbers and intent of the Tamanacke who have taken refuge on Earth. This is an enormous responsibility. And the urgency with which this must be done . . . not ideal.” Denia paused, looked off into the distance, then returned to the conversation. “We must be frank with you. You are young. With youth comes lack of focus, impatience, recklessness. With time and training, we can teach you how to properly manage and utilize your skills. It is our duty to do so. However, time is something we do not have. Your parents need you now. The Anuan people need you now.”

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The crushing responsibility being laid on my shoulders pressed down on me as if the air in the room had turned to lead. “I’ll—”

“Wait.” Denia raised her hand. “You must find balance. The tasks ahead will be too overwhelming without that.” She lowered her hand and closed her eyes. “Now, you close your own eyes. Breathe. Let the tension leave your body.” Denia’s calm essence lightened the room. She could only do so much, though. The rest was up to me. *But could I do it?*

“Yes, I’ll try—”

“No,” Denia said without opening her eyes and disrupting the calm vibrations around her. “This you will *do*. You need only to know that you can, and it *will* be so.”

“I understand.” I closed my eyes and focused on balancing myself the way Gaige had taught me. Letting every stress and heavy emotion drift away. Each one lifted and floated off into the universe, one sliver then another, until all the negative, troubling energy had left me. And it *was* so. I’d found my balance, even in the midst of such an incredibly heavy burden. If I could do that, I could do whatever else I set my mind to.

“Perfect,” Denia whispered.

Whispers of agreement from the others—Jahnay, Roccold, Galaird—mingled with the peace drifting around the room in light, airy swirls, like feathers floating in the breeze.

I opened my eyes. “I’m ready.”

“Very well. Let’s begin,” Denia said. “At present, visions come to you as they will, likely when you are more relaxed, when your mind is less cluttered, more open. Before you can seek out the Tamanacke, you must learn to control your visions. See what *you* want to see, when *you* want to see it. We have some exercises to help you with that.”

A box floated from the side of the room and came to rest next to Denia. Tiny pinpricks spread down my right arm, the side on which Denia—and her active energy—sat. The objects inside the box rose and floated one by one to different locations within the circle of chairs and gently lowered to the floor.

“These items were in other locations yesterday,” Denia said. “We retrieved them last night, placed them in this container, and brought them here to await our session. So, directly from yesterday to today. Nowhere in between. We feel you will be able to handle reaching back to yesterday to tell us where these were. This activity will begin to teach you focus and control.” Denia waved an arm toward the objects lying around the floor. “Feel free to move about the items, focusing on only one at a time. Concentrate on them as long as you like. Touch them. Hold them. Stand. Sit. Whatever feels comfortable to connect and reach back. Just think of them in terms of yesterday. Reach back to that time and find them.”

Denia fell silent, and all eyes were on me. I looked over the objects—a book, a small sculpture, a stress orb, a flower. I slid out of my seat and walked among the objects. The stress orb pulled at me the strongest. I picked it up and squeezed it in my hand. I felt Tas’s familiar energy. I closed my eyes and saw only darkness. I waited, concentrating on the object in my hand. Slowly Tas’s quarters came into my mind. I saw the object sitting on his desk.

“This belongs to Tas. It was in his quarters, on his desk.”

I opened my eyes to smiles on all the faces watching me.

“That is correct,” Denia said.

I did the same for the other objects. The book, an ancient log that graced the entrance of the Callon’s bridge corridor. The

## The Anuan Mission

flower with its wispy, pink petals came from Denia's quarters. I knew that not because I recognized her quarters. I'd never been there, but I recognized her energy in it. I took a long whiff of the flower's sweet, fresh perfume. Though it didn't look like one, it smelled like a rose—my favorite. I laid it back onto the floor and picked up the last item—the sculpture. I wasn't familiar with the energy around it, so I had to concentrate the longest to find where it had been the day before. Finally, someone's quarters came into focus. They weren't familiar to me. "I'm not sure . . . somebody's quarters . . . I feel strength, almost a warrior spirit. It's . . . one of the War Forces' soldiers . . ." A name came to me, but it meant nothing. I'd never heard it before, but I trusted my intuition. "Resset? Does this belong to a soldier named Ressel? Was it in his quarters?"

"It was indeed." Denia smiled. "Very well done. Every vision, every instinct correct. You are incredibly skilled." Denia held her hand out, and a small tablet about the size of a playing card floated from the box into her hand. "There is but one more thing we'd like you to do. Then that will be enough for one day."

The tablet floated in my direction and hovered in front of me.

"This time try to reach forward, to tomorrow. Where do you see these objects then?" Denia held a finger up. "But do not tell us. Write it down in the tablet and take it with you. Bring it back in the morning for tomorrow's lessons." She lowered her finger. "You may begin. Take as long as you need."

The group watched me as I touched each item, closed my eyes, and searched for where it might be. Being covered in familiar energy, the stress orb came most easily to me. The book and sculpture came after only a minute or two of concentrating. The flower took the longest. Several minutes. I wrote down where I'd

envisioned each one—the stress orb in Brian’s quarters; the logbook back in its place at the entrance to the bridge; the sculpture in Galaird’s quarters. The flower I saw in a place I didn’t know, filled with an energy I didn’t recognize. Finally, I did figure out the place. It was someone’s quarters. A female energy. I focused on the place, and the energy and the name Pandoma Bassik came to me. I wrote the information in the tablet with my finger and let out a tired sigh. “I’m finished.”

“Excellent,” Denia said. “We ask that you relax until we meet tomorrow. A clear, well-rested mind is essential to seeking out visions. Do you have any questions before we end our session?”

“No, none at the moment.”

“Very well,” Denia said. “That will be all for today.”

## 20 - TAS

“Entry requested.” The door to the virtual simulator slid open. “Remain open,” I said, knowing Gaige and Brian would be there soon.

The simulator, with its blank, white walls, waited to morph into whatever we told it to become. What that would be, I wasn’t quite sure. But Brian would explain soon.

Gaige walked through the still-open door. “Hey, Tas. The Mission Earth team is looking pretty good. Any idea what this meeting is about?”

“Not at all. Maybe Brian wants to start mapping out the facilities.”

Brian stepped into the room so silently that if I hadn’t felt the conflict in his emotions, I wouldn’t have known he’d even entered. Gaige—probably sensing him too—turned toward Brian just as I did. Dark circles lay beneath Brian’s red-rimmed eyes and stubble dotted his face.

“Brian, are you okay?” Gaige asked.

“I will be.” Brian took a deep breath, straightening his slumping posture. “I want to help.”

“You’re going to be helping,” I said.

“I want to do more than just help you develop your maps.” Brian looked around the virtual simulator, then started walking its

perimeter, examining every inch—floors, walls, ceiling. Touching, crouching, touching again. Standing, tipping his head from one angle to another. “I’m told these things can become any place you want them to be.”

“That’s right.” I nodded.

“I’d like to be on the ground team,” Brian said.

Gaige and I looked at each other. Gaige’s emotions were as confused as my own.

“There would be no need for you to be on the ground,” I said. “If you need to provide additional logistical guidance during the mission, you can do that from the ship. It would be too dangerous to have you on the ground for that.”

“Not for that. I want to help you get Tori’s parents back. I want to help you face these fuckers that have them.”

“But . . .” *Did this Kian have any clue what the Tamanacke could do to him, an untrained engineer?* “The War Forces train for years. Even the members of our Mission Earth teams have already had significant training and still may not be able to handle going on this mission. There isn’t time to get you ready for something like this.”

“Hmmm.” Brian pressed his lips together and nodded his head. “I can understand your hesitation. And maybe it’s warranted, but I’d like to find out. Can you have this room bring up some Tamanacke simulation? I’ll also need an AR-15 GAU rifle, used by the US military in the 1990s.”

Whatever Brian wanted to vet had my full attention now, and I ordered the gun he’d asked for—a clunky, primitive-looking object—and handed it to him.

He swallowed and slowly gripped the gun tighter. “Okay, so far so good. I’m ready for the simulation.”



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Gaige arched his eyebrows, and I shrugged. “Okay. Remember it’s just a simulation. Nothing can actually hurt you. The Tamanacke have a vulnerable spot in the center of their necks right here.” I touched the same spot on my own neck. “They’ll have some loose protection for the area, but due to their physiology, they’re not able to cover it closely. You’ll need to get just the right angle to clear the covering, but it’s the best chance you’ll have to take them down. They’re not going to stand still for you, though.”

“Got it. Your computer told me all about these bastards.” Brian fixed his stance, eyes already wildly scanning the room. “I’m ready.”

“Okay. Computer, execute Tamanacke simulation nineteen b.”

A forest materialized around us. Within seconds, a Tamanacke sprang from behind a tree. A loud bang rang out, and the Tamanacke dropped to the ground like a deflated zangor. A second Tamanacke lunged from Brian’s right. Brian swung around. Bang. And the Tamanacke dropped. And so it went until the simulation stopped and faded away.

“Nine of ten Tamanacke down within an average of zero point nine seconds of their appearances. One miss,” the computer announced.

Gaige and I stood with our mouths hanging open.

“I’m a little rusty,” Brian said, lowering his gun.

“Damn, Brian,” Gaige said. “You didn’t learn *that* working in a lab.”

“No, these skills came from another life. So,” Brian looked to me, “can I help you bring Tori’s parents home?”

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“Without a doubt,” I said, wondering what could have possibly taken Brian from a life where he needed these kinds of skills to that of the scientist Victoria knew on Earth.

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## 21 - VICTORIA

After my session, I followed the Council's direction and spent some time in the observation deck relaxing. On the way back to our quarters, I stopped by the training room to see if Gaige was almost finished working with the Mission Earth team members. No need to give Gaige another black eye, so I paused well down the hall and focused my energy inward. Deeper and deeper, pulling it tight, until it sat like a warm, little ball at the center of my core. Daigon, Gaige's father, was a master at blocking his energies. As the Mission Earth captain, he had to be. Gaige, however, painted his feelings on his face. I aimed to be more like Daigon.

"Well, let's see how this goes." I moved down the hall and quietly entered the training room, the gentle glide of the door barely audible.

Gaige didn't budge from his sparring. If Gaige hadn't picked up on my energy, no one else in the room would either. And they didn't.

In just a few minutes, Gaige ended the session, and the members trickled out a few at a time as they gathered up their things. I'd had my eye on Gaige and hadn't noticed anybody out of place until Brian stopped in front of me.

"Hey, Tori," he said.

“Hi, Brian. What are *you* doing here?”

He shrugged. “I thought I’d give this a try. You know, my way of contributing.”

“A try?” Gaige said. “You nearly kicked all our butts.”

“At the same time,” Conner added from the side of the room where he was talking with another team member.

“Beginner’s luck. I’ll see you guys later.” Brian grinned and headed out the door.

“I’ll explain on the way back to our quarters.” Gaige took a drink of water then gently touched my back. “Let’s go.”

As soon as we’d cleared the door, I scanned both directions down the corridor to make sure Brian was gone. I didn’t see him and only felt his energy in the distance—out of earshot. “What was Brian doing at the mission candidate workout? Doesn’t he know this is dangerous? Those Tamanacke will kill him!”

Gaige pursed his lips as we stepped onto the ibbs. “I doubt that.”

“What do you mean?”

“Deck seven,” Gaige said, and the ibbs floated upward. “I mean, he’s damn good. Better by far than anyone from Mission Earth, and I bet he’ll hold his own with the War Forces too.”

The ibbs door opened. We stepped out and walked in the direction of our quarters.

“Where would Brian get those kinds of skills? And why?” Images of Brian started coming to me. “Wait . . .” I held up my hand and stood still, continuing to focus my thoughts on Brian. Within seconds, I heard the same loud bang I’d heard when we were having lunch with Brian back on Anu. The sound caused me to jump.

“You okay?” Gaige said.

## The Anuan Mission

The vision of a gun flashed in my mind. A feeling of sheer panic engulfed my entire being and a desperation so deep I'd never felt anything like it before. I dropped to my knees, shaking.

Gaige knelt down beside me. "Victoria, tell me what's happening? Is it the Tamanacke?"

"Gunshot. The bang I heard when we were having lunch with Brian. It was a gunshot. He did something terrible. Something he can't undo. He'll never forgive himself." My heart raced, and my entire body continued to shake like I was freezing, but I wasn't.

"Okay, Victoria. You have to calm down. Breathe. Find balance. You can do it."

I took a long, deep breath and blew it out as slowly as I could, the air passing through quivering lips.

"Good, keep going."

I repeated the breathing, reaching out beyond the emotions of whatever situation invaded me. My heart rate slowed, my shaking hands steadied along with the rest of my body, and the emotions faded into the whole of the Universe.

"Good," Gaige said.

"I have the control. I just need to believe in myself. I *know* I can do whatever I set my mind to do. I have to remember that."

"Yes, you do," Gaige said.

I turned my focus from the Universe back to Brian, to attempt to separate myself from the emotions and only see the scene, but the emotions pulled me back. Everything was so intense. My body started to shake again. I turned back to the Universe, to Gaige, to the corridor in which we knelt, and completely blocked Brian out. I watched my hands—my barometer—slowly stop shaking again. "I didn't do it! I couldn't control it!"

“You will. Just give yourself time. You didn’t let the vision overtake you. That’s progress.”

“Maybe,” I said. “But I need to control these visions, and I need to do it now. There’s no time for slow progress.”

“Don’t beat yourself up. That won’t help. If anything, it will make it worse. You’re moving in the right direction. Be glad about that.” Gaige stood and extended a hand. “Come on. Let’s order something to eat. Nobody can function with a tired and hungry body.”

I walked along in silence, thinking about what I could have done differently to control the vision.

“Stop that,” Gaige said.

“Stop what?”

“Thinking about it. You’ll figure it out. Just not tonight.”

We’d reached our quarters, and the door slid open. Gaige gave the constructor some quick instructions and my favorite pizza appeared along with plates and soft drinks.

“Let’s eat.” Gaige sat the pizza, plates, and drinks on the table.

We ate and talked about nothing in particular. After being temporarily distracted by our meal, thoughts of what had happened on the way to our quarters started to creep back in.

“What if I can’t control my abilities? What if I’m never able to zero in on the Tamanacke and what they’re doing? What if I can’t help get my parents—”

“Whoa, slow down.” Gaige laid his slice of pizza on his plate. “You will. You can’t doubt yourself. That definitely won’t get you there.”

“You’re right. I know that, it’s just . . . no. You’re right and that’s all there is to it. I will learn to control my abilities. I *know* I can do it.”

## The Anuan Mission

“Yes, you can. That doesn’t mean it’s going to be easy, though.” Gaige pushed his plate away. “You know, you could use my energy. That might be like adding a drop of water to the ocean, but . . .” He shrugged.

“What do you mean, *use* your energy?”

“We’re bonded. We already easily exchange energy in a variety of ways. We can pick up each other’s feelings, thoughts, healing energy, much more so than if we weren’t bonded soulmates. We can exchange pure energy, too, for whatever use. So, you could feed off my energy and, added to your own . . .” He shrugged again. “Well, like I said, my abilities don’t compare to yours, but that extra little bit might help.”

“Let’s try it!” I pushed my own plate to the side and reached for Gaige’s hands. “My mom. I want to see my mom.”

“That should be an easy one for you. I definitely wouldn’t advise seeking out the Tamanacke without the Council.” Gaige adjusted himself in his chair. “Okay, do whatever you need to do to relax—close your eyes, breathe deep and slow, relax your muscles, whatever things work best for you—then focus on Tessy. I’ll relax too, but I won’t focus on anything except opening myself up for you to use my energy.”

“Okay! Ready?”

“Ready.”

I relaxed my mind and body and felt stronger, clearer. I could tell that Gaige’s energy was with me, giving me extra strength. I focused on my mother, but after a few minutes, only past visions came, beautiful memories but not a direct connection to my mother in her current state. My energy turned anxious, desperate—”

“Stop doubting yourself.” Gaige said, abruptly.

I jumped.

“Do like the Council told you. *Know* the control is yours and *take it.*”

“Take it. Yes. Command it to obey . . .” *Mom, where are you? Feel me!*

My mother slowly appeared in my mind. “I see her! I feel her!”

*Victoria! I feel you, sweetheart. Don’t worry. Mommy will be home soon.*

“She doesn’t realize I’m reaching out as an adult . . .”

“Maybe she’s still foggy from the drugs, but that’s probably best,” Gaige said. “Try and keep that blocked from her if you can. Best to spare her that shock for now.”

“Yes, you’re right. I’ll try and subdue my energy without breaking the connection.”

*“You! Where is my little girl?”*

“She’s asking for me. Someone else is with her. Besides my father, I mean. It’s a Tamanacke . . .”

“Be careful,” Gaige said.

*“I asked where my little girl is!” my mother said.*

*“She’s safe. She’s with her Anuan family.” The Tamanacke responded.*

*“You have to let us out of here. We need to get to our daughter.”*

“This Tamanacke,” I said. “He—no she—is keeping watch over my parents, monitoring their condition. She told my mother I’m safe, that I’m with my Anuan family.”

*“I am going to kick all your asses if you don’t let us out of here!” my mother said.*

I sniggered. “My mom, she said she’s going to kick their asses. I’ve never heard her curse. She’s restrained, so it’s all talk.”



## The Anuan Mission

*“Tessy, we’re going to get out of here,” my father said. “They didn’t kill us, right?”*

“My dad’s trying to calm her down. He’s restrained, too, though. She knows she’s alive for a reason and doesn’t think her attitude is going to make any difference in whether they kill them or not. She’s not going to make things easy on them.”

“No, Tessy wouldn’t.” Gaige laughed. “She was always strong-willed and apparently still is.”

*“I’m sorry . . . really, I can’t let you go,” The Tamanacke said. “They’d kill me. Please, be quiet.”*

“The Tamanacke is afraid . . . not only for herself, but for my parents too. She’s not only *afraid* for them, she feels *sorry* for them. Two more are coming into the room!”

*“Celit! Keep them quiet!” one said.*

Gaige jumped.

“You heard that, Gaige?”

Gaige got up from the table and paced around our quarters. “I heard, I saw, I felt.”

I followed Gaige. “Is that normal?”

“Yes, it makes sense. The Tamanacke aren’t known to be compassionate beings, so when you said the Tamanacke felt sorry for her, I was curious and probably focused on that instead of leaving my energy for you to do with what you would. It wasn’t a one-way flow of my energy to you anymore. I was unintentionally seeking something back, so it became a two-way exchange.” He looked down at me then with his worry face. “The Tamanacke monitoring your parents *did* have compassion. I felt it. It doesn’t make sense.” Gaige shook his head and stared out the window. “But the other two . . .”

I waited for a moment for Gaige to finish his sentence, but he'd drawn into himself. While I let him have some time, I felt my mother's essence dull. They'd sedated her and my father too. The Tamanacke who'd entered the room didn't want to hear any more of her outbursts.

"Gaige," I whispered, touching his arm.

He flinched but came back to me. "Yes."

"I'm sorry. I didn't mean to startle you."

He put his arm around me and pulled me close to him. "It's okay. You didn't. I was just . . . thinking."

"Remembering your encounter with the Tamanacke, you mean?"

One side of his mouth turned up in a half smile. "No sense trying to keep anything from you, I suppose. Yes, remembering that. What little there was to remember, anyway."

I laid my head against him. "I'm sorry."

"I know you are."

We stayed quiet like that for a long while until Gaige finally broke the silence.

"I guess we should clean up now. You did really great. The Council will be impressed." Gaige kissed me on the forehead, and then cleared the table and disposed of the leftover pizza in the constructor.

Later that night, after I'd fallen asleep with my head resting on Gaige's chest, his voice woke me. "What? I didn't hear you, Gaige." I rubbed my eyes. The computer hadn't initiated its sunrise sequence, so it had to be late still. "Gaige, I said I didn't hear you."

"I can't . . . I can't find him." Gaige's hand moved, bumping me in the arm.

## The Anuan Mission

“Computer,” I whispered. “Five percent Earth illumination.”

The lights rose enough for me to see that Gaige’s eyes were closed. His arms groped the air as if searching for something . . . or *someone*. His head began to thrash from side to side, his arms searched more urgently. His breathing grew louder with the rapidly increasing rise and fall of his chest. His pulse surged through his neck, causing the thin, pink scar to jump out at me with each beat of his heart. The incident that evening had sent Gaige back to that night again—the night that had given him the scar. I wanted to shake him awake, to bring him from that place as quickly as I could. But to jolt him like that on top of the panic he was already experiencing in his dream wouldn’t help.

Gaige’s voice rose, talking to his mission team. He swung his arms back and forth so wildly that he nearly knocked me off the bed. I drew a deep breath and gathered as much calm into myself as possible. Gaige needed a reprieve from the worst night of his life, and he needed it now, so I’d have to work with whatever calming energy I could gather in a few, short seconds. I sat up next to Gaige, legs folded under me. Trying to avoid being hit by his still-flailing arms, I placed both my hands as gently as I could on Gaige’s stomach and chest. He gasped when I touched him.

“It’s okay, Gaige,” I whispered.

His skin felt so warm and soft, but the muscles beneath were as tight and solid as steel. I pushed my calm energy into him, the same way I’d pushed healing energy into him the night he was reliving in his dreams. He let out a deep breath, and his arms relaxed to his sides, the arm next to me resting across my knees. His pulse still raced, and his head moved back and forth, though not as much. Words formed on his lips that I couldn’t make out.

“Rest, Gaige, you’re okay. Everything is okay.”

Traci Ison Schafer

I continued to will peace for him until his pulse slowed back to normal, and his chest rose and fell much more gently. His head rolled softly to one side, still and quiet now. Remaining where I sat, I removed my hands and watched him sleep, knowing the pink line on his neck was not the only scar he carried from the night he nearly died.

Advanced Reader Copy

## 22 - VICTORIA

After Gaige's dream, I hadn't rested well and was up and dressed early. While I waited for Gaige to catch up, I sat by the window, watching stars streak by. I reached to the Universe for balance but instead found myself focused toward Earth, a world still too far away to see but not too far to feel. I felt my parents—both sets of them, biological and adoptive—and I felt all the other beings that inhabited it, including the Tamanacke. The Earth itself emitted an essence. A wonderful, peaceful essence. Unfortunately, some of those who inhabited it marred that peaceful energy. The closer we got, the stronger I felt Earth and all those it sustained.

“Ready?” Gaige closed the front of his ship suit and held his bent elbow out to me.

I wrapped my arm around his, and we left our quarters.

“Distance is still a factor with my senses,” I said.

“That's not surprising. I bet it won't always be. For you, anyway.”

As we walked down the corridor, into the ibbs and out again, my mind stayed on what I'd told Gaige. *Distance is a factor*. It didn't matter what I'd achieve someday. For this mission, the *now* mattered. I considered what that meant, and the more I thought about it, the more strongly I felt about what I needed to do. But Gaige wouldn't like it.

“Have a good session,” Gaige stopped at the door to the ship’s Council Hall.

“Oh, that was fast.”

“Daydreaming has a way of making time pass quickly. What were you thinking about?”

“I . . . just speculating.”

Gaige narrowed his eyes at me. “I need to go, but we’ll talk about this later.” Gaige kissed me goodbye and continued down the corridor.

“Yes, we will,” I said under my breath.

With my idea still teetering on the brink of viability, I entered Council Hall and was greeted by my four mentors—Denia, Galaird, Roccold, and Jahnay.

Denia studied me for a moment, her head slightly tipped like a puppy trying to figure out what I was saying, or in her case, what I was feeling or perhaps even thinking. “What troubles you, my child? Did your meditation not go well?”

“My meditation went very well. It really helped. I even saw a vision. Two actually. The first was about Brian. I wasn’t completely successful in controlling that one. But later, Gaige let me use his energy, and I was able to go straight to my mother, like I wanted.”

“This is good progress. Your control will continue to improve with time and patience. Brian’s business is for him to share, but let’s sit, and you can tell us what your predictions from yesterday were and what you saw when you sought out your mother.”

We took our seats and reviewed my predictions.

“Every one is correct,” Denia said. “Very impressive. But not surprising. Now, let us hear about your vision.”

## The Anuan Mission

I rested my head against the back of the chair. “My parents were still in the same dreary place with a Tamanacke watching over them. The Tamanacke keep their room extra dim on purpose, I think, to try and keep my parents more subdued. It didn’t seem to have the desired effect on my mom. She had an outburst, and two other Tamanacke came in. One of those who entered ordered them to be sedated. But not suspended like before—I can still feel them as living beings. These three Tamanacke . . . they’re the same ones I saw in the vision when I realized my parents were alive. My mother doesn’t know how much time has passed. Gaige thought it best to filter that from her.”

“That is likely best for now. She has much to contend with already.”

“Yes, she does,” I agreed.

Denia closed her eyes for a moment then opened them again. “But this is not what troubles you.”

“No. I mean, yes, I’m worried about my parents, but I’m also worried about Gaige. The Tamanacke who watches over my parents, she’s younger and not as . . . well, mean, as the other two. When *those* two came in, it really affected Gaige. He’s struggling with what happened to him. You know, when he was attacked by the Tamanacke on Earth.”

“Yes, we do know. That is to be expected and will take some effort for him to overcome. But he will work through it. If he cannot do that on his own, we can help him. The Council—all of us here, on other ships, and on Anu—monitors the emotional health of our people. Healing is best from within, but we are always here to assist.” Denia smiled. “I sense this eases your concern for your husband’s well-being. But this is still not all that troubles you.”

“No, it isn’t . . .” With the Tamanacke heavy on my mind, before I could tell the Council my thoughts about proximity and my abilities, the creatures pulled my attention away. “I think . . . I think a vision of the Tamanacke is coming to me. I feel the heavy, dark energy of the two who affected Gaige so much.”

“Let it come,” Denia said. “But know that *you* are in control.”

I closed my eyes and opened myself to the vision. “Yes, it’s them.”

“Can you sense anything about them?” Galaird said.

I let my energy surround them, to become more familiar with them. To *know* them. “Yes, I can! Lome. One is called Lome. He’s the leader . . . of them all! The other is his second-in-command. Cruck, I think. Yes, that feels right. These two will know everything we need. They’re back to check on my parents. The caregiver assures them that my parents are doing well, and she will keep them sedated, leaving them with just enough consciousness to lure us in. The leaders are satisfied with how things are going. They’re leaving.”

“Let your focus stay with them,” Denia said in a hypnotically soft voice. “See where they go, what they are planning. Lead your vision where you want it to go. *You* are the master of your abilities.”

“Yes. I am.” My voice came out firmer and deeper than usual, with no doubts hiding beneath it. My energy wanted to stay with my parents, but I knew I *had* to go with Lome and Cruck. I *had* to find out what the Tamanacke were planning. And I *would*!

The two walked down a dingy-gray concrete hallway . . .

*“Our plans are going perfectly.” Lome said. “The Anuans are undoubtedly on the way. They would never abandon their loved*



## The Anuan Mission

*ones, even ones as insignificant as those two. And I cannot wait for them to arrive.”*

*“We’ll know the second they come within detectable range,” Cruck said.*

“They assume we’re coming, only because they know Anuans wouldn’t abandon their own. But they can’t detect us yet. We’re too far off. They’re watching, though, waiting until we get within range.”

The image started to slip away. “No! What’s the range? When will you be able to see us?” I held tight to their dark energy, desperate for more information, but their energy faded into the distance, and the vision disintegrated into a cloud of scattered remnants no more substantial than dust particles in a ray of light. I opened my eyes. “I don’t know when they’ll be able to see us! Their whole point in keeping my parents is to lure us in. We already knew they’d be watching and waiting for us. I learned nothing anybody else couldn’t have already guessed! I accomplished nothing.” I slammed my fists against my thighs.

Denia raised her hand. “That is not so. You have gained more control over your visions. That is a significant accomplishment.”

I relaxed my hands. “You’re right. I’m sorry for my behavior. I thought I had the emotional instability of these newly presented abilities under control. But . . .”

“This is to be expected. You are young, and this *is* an overwhelming situation. We are aware of that, and there is no need to apologize.” Denia lowered her arm.

I took a few breaths, thinking about what this advancement could mean. The progress tipped the idea that had been bouncing around in my head to the viable side of my indecisive fence. With

my mother sedated, she would be of no help to us. I had to give them everything I could.

“Proximity is still a factor with my abilities,” I blurted out.

“That’s probably true.” Jahnay brushed a wisp of blond hair from her face. “But you’ll get better with that. Wait . . . why do you bring that up?”

The Council members’ faces, usually blank to their thoughts, showed a little extra tightness in the jaws, a fine wrinkling of the brows. Almost undetectable. Almost. And the telepathic communication in the room was so thick I could practically hear it, like the buzz of a high-powered electrical line.

“Proximity is helpful to you now, but there is much more to be considered,” Denia said.

Galaird leaned in my direction. “You are still very new to your abilities. You *must* remember that.”

“I understand that. But if I were to go down to Earth with the mission teams, I could be of more use in detecting where the Tamanacke are and what they’re doing. I have control of my visions.”

“I know you feel . . .” Jahnay searched the room as if looking for the answer to eject from the wall like a piece of Anuan furniture. “Indefensible, maybe. We all do at first. But these powers need to be developed.”

“She’s right, Victoria,” Roccold added, running a hand through his curly locks. “You need to be very cautious.”

Denia raised one finger, almost pointing at me, but not quite. “Listen to what we are telling you, my child. You have only begun to gain control of your visions. Do not assume consistency or that your progress will continue at the same rate you have so far experienced.”

## The Anuan Mission

“I *will* continue to control my visions, better and better each day. I *will*. No assumptions. Only positive intentions. Combine that with the sharpness that proximity will bring—”

“We do not recommend it,” Denia said. “It would be too much danger to you.”

“I’m one person. That shouldn’t take precedence over my parents and the entire rescue team.”

Denia took a deep breath. “I did not want to dwell on such an overwhelming responsibility, but to make you understand, I must. Yes, you are one person, but you are one person who holds the fate of an entire race in your hands. The risk would be too great.”

The weight of her statement hit me like a truck. Had I ever truly thought of my role like that? I *was* the only person who could give them insight about the Tamanacke. Still, I had to do that in the most efficient way I could. “I’d know where the Tamanacke are and what they’re doing with much more certainty than if I were assessing the situation from the ship. That would eliminate the risk to me and everyone else.”

“There is always risk when skills are so raw,” Galaird said. “We cannot support what you are suggesting.”

## 23 - VICTORIA

Gaige was a social person, and it didn't take him long to want to venture out to some of the community areas of our new home ship, the Callon. So, still stewing about the Council's opinion of my going to the surface, I met him in one of the restaurants in the ship's binmar.

Gaige stood when he saw me coming. "Did you have a good session today?"

"Um, yeah, pretty good." I sat down at the table. "I got all my predictions right and made some progress with gaining control over my visions."

"That's great! Let's order, then you can tell me all about it. Summary menu." Gaige sat and leaned toward the table where the menu would be displayed.

A transparent image of food appeared over the middle of our table, and the computer stated a name, then another image appeared, accompanied by another name. The spicy scents that already filled the restaurant changed slightly with each dish image.

A concoction of red- and yellow-streaked waxy leaves glistening in a clear liquid with dots of dark-blue spices caught Gaige's eye. "That looks good. Computer, I'll have the talmar and water."

## The Anuan Mission

“I’ll have the same.” With other things on my mind, I couldn’t be bothered with thinking about a food choice.

“So, more control. That’s a good step.” The menu disappeared, and Gaige rested an arm on the table. “Tell me about what you were able to do.”

“I was able to follow two of the Tamanacke away from my parents.”

Gaige was quiet for a moment. He didn’t like the Tamanacke anywhere near me, even in my head. He settled his worry energy, or rather, stifled it. “That’s good progress.”

I placed my hand on Gaige’s arm. “Thank you, Gaige. For supporting my decision to help with the Tamanacke.”

“Always.”

*Always.* I hoped he’d still have that opinion after he heard my idea, which I was in no hurry to tell him.

He put his hand over mine. “Now, about your daydreaming earlier. It felt pretty heavy to me.”

“You know, maybe I’ll have the mecco juice instead of water. That’s my favorite drink here. I could have one every day. Did I tell you they’re just like milkshakes back on Earth? They taste like strawberry, chocolate, and banana all mixed into one shake.”

“Yes.” Gaige cocked his head. “I know that—”

“You want one too? Computer, I’d like to add a mecco juice.”

“No, I’m fine with water.” Gaige narrowed his eyes at me, just as he had when he left me at the door to Council Hall earlier. “Victoria . . .”

The food appeared on our table, complete with Earth utensils since we’d ordered in English.

“Oh, good. I’m starving.” I picked up a fork and stuffed a leaf of talmar into my mouth.

Gaige took the fork from my hand and laid it on the table. “Okay, Victoria. What’s on your mind? All I can tell is that I won’t like it. At all.”

I swallowed my mouthful of food then took a drink of my mecco juice, trying to come up with any good argument that would make an overprotective husband agree with my participating in the ground portion of the mission. On the one hand, it was my choice. On the other hand, the Council didn’t support it, and as joint commander, Tas would have a say in it too.

“Victoria?”

I picked up my fork. I didn’t bother to take a bite but needed something in my hand to occupy my nervous energy while I thought through how I might possibly convince Gaige to be okay with me being a part of the ground team. “You’re right. You won’t like it.”

“I already know that much. Now what won’t I like?”

I let out a heavy sigh and put the fork down with a decisive clank. “Okay. But I want you to keep an open mind.”

He pressed his lips together. “It’s kind of hard with the energy you’re putting off. You already know I’m not going to agree with this. Whatever *this* is.”

“No, I expect you won’t. At first, anyway. But maybe after you think about it—”

“Just tell me, Victoria.”

“I want to be a member of the rescue mission. Not just in a support function. I want to go to the surface with the team.” The words came out much faster than I thought they would. But there they were, where they could be dealt with.

“You can’t be serious.” Gaige pushed his plate to the side, nearly knocking it off the table.

## The Anuan Mission

“Yes, I’m serious. You could help train me.”

“I can’t train you for this kind of mission. And even if I could, I wouldn’t train you to go out and commit suicide!”

Heads turned in our direction. Gaige leaned closer to me and lowered his voice.

“You *know* what a Tamanacke would do to you, Victoria. You need to forget about this.”

“I could help the mission. I can see the Tamanacke. And I have control over my visions now. I told you—I was able to follow two of them away from my parents. I wasn’t bound to the people I knew.”

Gaige leaned back and ran both hands through his short, dark hair. After taking a long breath, his focus returned to me. “That’s great, but you can follow them from the ship. We have communication devices. You can feed the information to the team from here.”

“I’m still new at this—”

“Exactly!”

“I was going to say, since I’m still new at this, I’d have more clarity if I were closer. We need every advantage we can get, no matter how slight.”

Gaige pushed back from the table. “It would be too much risk to you. And to the team, having to look after you when they need to be concentrating on the mission. The answer’s no.”

I crossed my arms, more determined than ever after Gaige’s proclamation. “I’m not asking you. I’m informing you of my intentions.”

Gaige clenched his jaw, took a deep breath, and let it out slowly. “You’re right. Let me rephrase that. I don’t support your

intention of going on the ground portion of the mission to rescue your parents.”

“Can you just think about it with an open mind?”

“I’m sorry, Victoria. I know you’re very independent, and I want to support you in every way, but I can’t go along with this.” He got up from the table and left the restaurant.

I slumped in my seat and stared at our uneaten meals, hoping Gaige would change his mind and come back. But I knew better. The Council was against me going. Gaige was against it. Tas would most likely be against it too. But I couldn’t give up. If I could provide better information from the ground, I wanted to give my parents that advantage.

I twisted the gold band on my left ring finger for a long while, thinking. After a few minutes, a vision of my parents came to me. They lay quiet and sedated in the same room with the caregiver still looking over them.

“Mom and Dad, I won’t let you down.” But I didn’t want to cause Gaige any more stress than he already had to deal with, either. I could feel him in the observation deck, also twisting the ring on his left ring finger, trying to be open-minded about what I wanted to do but failing miserably.

*“I love you, Gaige.”*

*“I love you too.”*



## 24 - VICTORIA

I lay in bed staring up at the dark ceiling. Not anxious to discuss my idea any further, Gaige hadn't come home after he left the observation deck. "You can't work out all night Gaige. I *will* wait you out."

Anger, frustration, and fear could carry a body well past the usual point of exhaustion and was where Gaige was concerned. And as long as he sensed I was still awake, he'd keep going.

I breathed as slow as I could, inhaling deeply through my nose and blowing the air out through my mouth. Again and again. Relaxing, but still hanging on to the night by the thinnest thread of consciousness. Dreams picked at my wavering brain, but I held them at the edges of reality. They wouldn't take me. Not yet anyway.

My body floated between *the here* and *the there*, drifting more toward *the there*, getting lighter . . . and lighter . . . and light—

The door to our quarters glided open, its soft swish reaching out to touch my ears.

"Gaige?"

"Go back to sleep." His footfalls padded toward the bathroom, its door closing behind him.

I rubbed my eyes and sat up in bed, listening and waiting. The ion cleansing scan clicked on, hummed for a few minutes, then clicked off, but Gaige didn't emerge from the bathroom.

"Gaige?"

Nothing.

"Gaige, you can't ignore me forever."

"I'm not ignoring you. I'm just getting ready for bed. Go back to sleep. I'll be out soon."

"Computer, twenty percent Earth illumination." I tiptoed to the bathroom door. "You are ignoring me. No human needs to work out as long as you did tonight."

"What else do I have to do here?"

"You came to support your wife."

"I can't support what you want to do. Please just go back to bed. I told you I'll be there soon."

I tilted my ear toward the door. "Gaige, you're not getting ready for bed. You're waiting on me to fall asleep. Tell me I'm wrong."

Silence.

"Gaige. This is ridiculous!" I pounded on the door. "Come out of there and talk to me. I'm going to do this with or without your support! So, ignoring me isn't going to stop that. I can't wait for you to come around."

Gaige jerked the door open, overpowering its soft, automated swish and slamming it into the wall. "Come around? I will *never* change my position on this, Victoria. You are *not* qualified to do what you want to do."

"I can get qualified. I can train—"

## The Anuan Mission

Gaige rubbed his hand across his face and brushed past me, going toward the bed. “You are the most stubborn person I’ve ever met.”

“I thought you liked my determination.”

Gaige turned toward me, dropping his hand to his side, and stared at me like I had two heads.

“What?”

He shook his head opening his mouth to speak but no words came out. The emotions emanating from him ebbed, flowed, and twisted into a knotted mess of conflicting energies. I didn’t know which one I’d see next. He loved me but was also desperate to keep me safe any way he could.

I ran to him and threw my arms around him. “Please don’t be upset.”

He held me tight against his body and let out an exhausted sigh. “I can’t help it. I’m scared to death of what will happen to you if this idea of yours comes to pass.”

“Nothing will happen to me.” But I couldn’t be sure. My intuition told me nothing of it—my emotions were too tangled to see anything clearly. But I had to give this mission the best possible chance of succeeding, and the closer I was, the sharper my visions would be. I *had* to do it.

## 25 - VICTORIA

After a nice breakfast together, I sifted through the basket of shells sitting on the table while Gaige got dressed. I was positive Gaige and I had turned a corner about my going to the surface. Oh, he still wasn't happy about it, but he wasn't going to let that come between us. So why did I feel . . . *off*? My body surged with a strange energy. The intensity of it filled me with a sort of static charge.

“What are you scratching at?” Gaige squinted at my arm.

“I don't know. It itches. Well, not really an itch. It tingles, like it's been asleep.” I scratched my other arm with the same vigor and then my neck. “It's getting worse.”

“When did this start?” He lifted my arm and turned it from back to front. “I don't see a rash. Just a bunch of scratch marks.”

“It only started a few minutes ago, but it's getting worse fast.” I grabbed the collar of my ship suit, pulling it as far as I could away from my neck, which wasn't far. It went right back into place, the material being too resilient to stretch out. “I feel smothered. Like everything is closing in around me.” I yanked the magnetic closures at the front of my ship suit open, trying to relieve the growing pressure on my lungs. “I can't breathe.”

“Victoria, what is going on?”

“I don't—”

## The Anuan Mission

A shutter jolted the ship, throwing Gaige to the floor and nearly knocking me out of my seat.

Gaige scrambled to his feet. “I have a feeling we’re about to find out.”

Another shutter rocked the ship, knocking us both onto the floor this time. My basket of shells crashed onto the floor next to us, scattering colors of Anu across the room.

“It’s not good, Gaige. It’s not good!”

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## 26 - TAS

“Senior staff to the bridge,” Callon’s com system shrieked, but Daigon and I were already on the way. When we ran onto the bridge, Captain Wissic was coordinating efforts with Captains Donhart of the Altron and Rayan of the Baylon, whose ships were experiencing the same phenomenon.

“We’ve hit some kind of subspace anomaly,” Captain Wissic said as senior staff, including Denia, poured onto the bridge. “Nothing showed up on sensors.”

“Pressure on the ship’s hull is increasing, sir,” a lieutenant said, reading from her display.

“We’re experiencing the same,” Captain Rayan said over the bridge com link.

“Same here,” Captain Donhart chimed in. “Structural integrity of our hull will give way within ten minutes.”

“Confirmed for us as well, sir,” the lieutenant said.

“Transfer all reserve power to enhance the hull.” Captain Wissic paced the bridge, going from one display to another. “If anybody has any input, let’s have it!”

Daigon stepped forward. “I’ve heard of something like this.”

“Go on,” Wissic said as the ship rumbled.

“The captain I trained under—her father was lost in an accident when his ship ran into some kind of anomaly.” Daigon swallowed.

## The Anuan Mission

“The ship was crushed, and all hands were lost. Not enough data survived the accident to learn much about it.”

“Not the kind of input I was hoping for, Daigon.” Captain Wissic rubbed his face.

“Captain.” Denia raised a delicate hand. “This does appear to be some kind of energy phenomenon. Perhaps the Council and I can help.”

“Do what you do, Denia!”

Denia rushed out without another word.

“Captain, we’re losing propulsion,” the helmsman yelled. “Whatever we’re caught in is creating resistance on the ship and putting a strain on the system.”

“How long until we’re out of here?” Wissic asked him.

“At this rate, not for another twelve minutes.”

“We’ll be crushed before then,” the lieutenant said.

“Helmsman, can we go back?” Wissic asked.

“If we have to change course, we’ll lose momentum. It would take us longer to go back than it would to stay the course.”

“We’ve got to move faster,” Wissic said. “Shut down all non-essential functions and transfer power to propulsion.”

“Sir,” the lieutenant said. “Decks seven through ten are reaching critical levels for hull breach.”

My heart thumped in my chest. “Victoria and Gaige!” I said to Daigon.

“I know. Daigon to Gaige,” Daigon said through his com link. “Get out of your quarters, now!”

“Hull breach on decks seven through ten imminent in two minutes,” the computer said over the ship’s com system. “Evacuate decks seven through ten immediately.”

Sweat dripped down Captain Wissic's temple. "Evacuate all hands to segment one, seal off that area, and shut down life support everywhere else. Use the power gained to enhance the structural integrity of segment one."

Daigon had gotten no response yet from Gaige. They had to hear the warning messages, though. They had to be evacuating. They *had* to be.

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## 27 - GAIGE

Victoria reached a hand down to grab one of the shells. She didn't understand.

"No!" I pulled her toward the door to the corridor. "If we don't get out of here, we're going to be sucked into space!"

"Oh my God." She gave up her attempt to retrieve a shell and tightened her grip on my hand.

Another rumble rocked the ship, and a loud crack sounded. A line streaked across the outside wall of our quarters just as we got close enough to the door for it to open. The line split apart ever so slightly but enough to create a force that sucked us away from the door. I grabbed the edge of the cooking counter and pulled us back toward the opening to the corridor. The tension on my arm tightened as Victoria was drawn in the direction of the crack.

"Hold on as tight as you can." I pushed with my feet, dragging Victoria behind me, until I was close enough to grab the edge of the open door. But the crack was growing from its original hairline size and pulling at us harder. Finally, I was able to get far enough through the doorway that I could brace my feet against the outside. I tugged Victoria as hard as I could through the opening. "Override proximity sensor and close door!" I yelled.

"Oww! My foot. It's caught!"

“Damn it! It’s okay. We’ll get you loose. We can’t open the door, though. The crack is growing too large for me to fight the pull it’s creating. Can you get your foot out of your shoe?”

Victoria twisted her right foot but it was caught too tight. The pressure was decreasing and if I didn’t get her foot out soon and get the door completely closed, our lungs would explode. So would everybody else’s who scrambled through the corridor. I grabbed her by the ankle and pulled. It didn’t budge. The crack split open to several inches wide, and the pain in my lungs was becoming excruciating. We wouldn’t last much longer. I had to get the door closed.

“I’m so sorry!” I grabbed her ankle again, with no consideration this time of avoiding damage, and yanked as hard as I could. She and I fell back into the corridor as her shoe flew into space and the door closed.

Victoria turned pale as shock set in. I jerked the top of my ship suit off and wrapped it around her bloody, shredded foot. “Link to sickbay. Emergency transition!”

The corridor faded away and sickbay formed around us.

“What do you have, Gaige?” Zada said as she scanned someone lying on the bed next to us in the bustling sickbay.

“She’s bleeding. A lot.”

Zada looked up then. “Yes she is. We need to get that stopped. Sosha, take over here.” She handed her scanner to Sosha and rushed over to an empty bed, pulling another scanner from the wall. “Bring her here, Gaige.”

As soon as I placed Victoria on the bed, her eyes closed, and her head fell to the side. I gasped.

“It’s okay, Gaige.” Zada said, not looking up. “She’ll be okay. We just need to give her a little attention.” Zada put a blood

## The Anuan Mission

regeneration patch on the calf of her right leg and waved the scanner over her right foot several times. Finally, the blood stopped flowing, but the foot was a mess. “I know it looks bad, Gaige, but it’s nothing a regeneration boot won’t fix.” Zada slid Victoria’s foot into a regeneration boot and pushed a few buttons on the side of the boot. “The missing portion is just skin and a little muscle. The bones are still intact, so it should regenerate quickly. Maybe a week or so.”

“Oh, good.” I let out the breath I’d been holding. “Thank you, Zada.”

“Of course.” Zada finally had a chance to look up from Victoria’s foot. “It appears I have plenty of other work to do. I’ll check back when I can.”

Denia and the rest of the Councilors rushed in. “We sensed Victoria here,” Denia said. “What happened?”

“Her foot was caught in the door when we were trying to evacuate our room. She lost a lot of blood and part of the foot, but she’ll be okay.”

“I don’t mean to be insensitive, Gaige, but we need her.”

The ship rumbled again, and the warning messages came back into my awareness. More decks had been breached, and the ship wouldn’t hold together much longer. Everybody was being evacuated to segment one, the essential portion of the ship that included sickbay. I nodded. “I’ll try and wake her.” I took hold of Victoria’s shoulders. “Victoria.” I shook her lightly at first, then harder. “Victoria, you *have* to wake up.”

Denia placed a hand on Victoria’s arm. “Child, you must wake.”

Victoria’s eyes opened to a slit.

“That’s it, child. Wake up.”

A quake rocked the ship, and everyone struggled to stay upright. The medical staff pulled belts across the newly arrived, unsecured patients to keep them from falling off their beds.

“We must start,” Denia said.

The Councilors formed a circle around Victoria and joined hands. The two on each side of Victoria’s head included her in the circle by touching her shoulders.

The warning messages continued. Two more decks breached.

“Victoria,” Denia began. “I know you can hear me and are coming back to us. Here’s what we must do. There’s an energy outside the ships that is threatening to crush them. We must create enough energy within the ships to counterbalance those effects and keep the ships from being destroyed. We have to give everything we have just long enough to clear the anomaly. . .” Denia continued to talk Victoria and the rest of the Councilors through the process, guiding them along as they focused on expanding their energy fields outward.

Victoria opened her eyes and held her hands out, helping fortify the walls with her will.

“All hands, stay the course. We clear the anomaly in thirty seconds,” the Captain said over the ship’s com.

A shutter rippled through sickbay.

“Twenty seconds.”

A rumble.

“Ten seconds.”

Another shutter. This one stronger than the last, causing everyone to stumble.

“We’re clear!”

Cheers erupted. But how much of the ships were left to make it to Earth? And what of the crew?

## 28 - VICTORIA

With the step-thud rhythm caused by my regeneration boot, Gaige and I walked down the corridor of deck seven toward our quarters with thoughts of the five lost crew members still heavy on our minds. It had been only a week since the incident with the anomaly. Getting all the systems back to full working order would take a while, but thanks to constructor technology, repairs of the breaches were almost complete. Our deck would be fixed the next day, and I wanted to see it before the repairs.

“You sure you want to do this?” Gaige asked.

“I’m sure.”

We reached our quarters and stopped at the now open door. The wavy distortion caused by the force field separated us from the damaged portion of our room, now a gaping crack more than a foot wide, stretching from one side of the room to the other. Not one thing remained in our quarters. The cooking counter we hadn’t reset into the floor from breakfast that morning had been ripped from the room. The table we’d eaten at, gone. And my Anuan shells . . . all gone. “Do you think it was an omen?”

“An omen?”

“You know, a sign. Maybe things are going to end badly.”

“You need to stop obsessing over this. The ships made it through the incident, didn’t they? The only other time this type of

anomaly was encountered, the ship and entire crew were lost. I'd say the fact that we survived is a sign—a good one.”

Gaige squinted into the room. “Wait a minute . . . stay here.” Gaige entered our quarters.

“What are you doing? Don't get too close to the force field.”

“I won't.” He squatted near one of the remaining floor panels and plucked at something underneath its edge. When he finally rose, he held his hand in a tight fist. He walked back to me with a smile on his face. “Hold out your hand.”

I held my hand out, and he dropped a small, pink Anuan shell into my palm.

“There. You still have a little piece of Anu to hold onto until we get back. How's that for a sign?”

## 29 - GAIGE

Not even what had happened with the anomaly could distract Victoria from her conviction that she could better sense the Tamanacke from the ground. She was probably right. Even the Council agreed with that. The closer we got to Earth, the more they were proven right. Proximity *was* a factor. That didn't mean it was a good idea for her to go on the mission. Even so, she'd managed to be granted an audience with the joint mission commanders—Tas and the War Forces' Commander, Willet Paser. As Victoria's advisors, the Councilors would also attend the meeting, which would be held in the Callon's Council Hall. Captain Donhart—captain of the lead ship, Altron, and a neutral party—would preside over the meeting.

Still at an impasse—me not wanting her to go and her not willing to give up the idea—Victoria and I got ready in silence in our newly repaired quarters. The decision would be in the hands of the joint commanders now.

Victoria touched my arm. "Please don't be mad at me."

I turned from the constructor, where I'd been unsuccessfully considering what, if anything, to eat for breakfast. "I'm not mad at you." I hugged her and held her close to me. "I'm terrified for your life."

She wrapped her arms around my waist and laid her head against my chest. “I know, but please understand, this isn’t something I *want* to do, it’s something I *have* to do. It’s a drive so deep inside me that I can’t quiet it.”

“I understand there’s a power in you higher than anything I—or most of us—experience, and you’re listening to that right now. But can you really comprehend what it’s telling you yet? This power in you has only recently presented itself and is still very foreign to you. You may not be able to rely on it.”

“I’m going to work hard to develop it and learn how to manage it properly. Please don’t worry, Gaige.”

Still holding her tight, I breathed in the scent of her hair, not wanting to ever let her go. “Me not worrying about what you’re trying to do is probably like you not wanting to do it. I’m not sure what we can do to make either happen.”

Victoria was silent for a while then pulled away from me and took my hand. “Well . . . are you ready to go?”

“I’ll never be ready for the possibility that you’ll be put in harm’s way.”

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We arrived at Council Hall early, but everyone else—the Council members, Tas, Commander Paser, and Captain Donhart—was already there and in place in a semicircle of chairs. Two chairs sat facing them—one for Victoria and one for me. She’d wanted me with her even though I still didn’t agree with her idea. Being present was all I could give her where the matter was concerned. We sat down, ready for things to begin.



## The Anuan Mission

Captain Donhart called the meeting to order. “Victoria, we’ll begin by having you state your reason for requesting to speak with the joint commanders in a formal capacity.”

Victoria stood. “Captain, Commanders, Councilors.” She bowed her head to the group then looked to Commander Paser. “Unlike other Anuans, I can sense the Tamanacke. I feel their presence. I see them in visions, both past and future. I can follow their movements.”

“I’ve been briefed,” Commander Paser said. “There’s no doubt you will be a valuable asset where this mission is concerned.”

“Thank you,” Victoria said.

For the first time, I sensed some hesitation in her. Not surprising. I had no doubt that she was about to pit Commander Paser and Tas against each other. She had to know that too.

“I’ve found that at this early stage in the development of my abilities, the closer I am to a situation, the stronger they are. So, if I went to the surface with the—”

“There is *no way*.” Tas stood up, his booming voice causing Victoria to jump. “Victoria, you don’t know what you’re saying. You’ve never faced these beings. I have. They’d kill you with one easy swat.”

“Tas,” Captain Donhart said. “Sit down. Let her finish. We granted her an audience, and we’ll hear her out.”

Tas opened his mouth to say something else but pressed his lips together instead and sat down. At least I’d been right about Tas. He’d fight this with everything he had. *Good*.

“Victoria,” Captain Donhart said. “Please continue.”

“I want to provide the best possible advantage I can. That will only happen if I’m on the ground with the team, not on the ship. On the ground, I’d have a much better perspective about where

the Tamanacke are and what they're thinking and doing. We'd be able to adjust our strategy at every step to stay clear of them, so they won't figure out that we've infiltrated their compound. They're waiting on us. We all know that. We have to stay one step ahead of them, and I can better help you do that on the ground." She took a breath. "Please, grant me permission to be on the ground team." She lifted her chin and stood strong, like a soldier at attention. She exuded strength by her attitude, her looks, and her emotions, with not one doubt about what she wanted to do. With her abilities and the insight they brought her, that strength would carry a lot of weight.

"Thank you, Victoria," Captain Donhart said. "You may be seated."

Victoria sat down hard in her seat next to me. I reached for her hand and squeezed it. Whether I liked what she was trying to do or not, I respected her tenacity.

The Captain looked to Tas. "Since you've already voiced some concerns, we'll let you finish sharing those."

"This is a terrible idea, Captain. She barely knows how to use any of the skills she has, and she doesn't have the slightest amount of training for even the most benign scientific ground mission, let alone a mission that might bring her face-to-face with the Tamanacke." He turned to Victoria. "I know you want to get your parents back. But let *us* handle that. We're trained for ground missions, the War Forces are trained for battle, and the more senior members of this mission have faced these beasts before. You have none of that. Look at Gaige."

Victoria startled at that and turned to me.

"Don't forget how he got that scar on his neck. If he hadn't been cloaked, he'd be dead."

## The Anuan Mission

“Tas,” Captain Donhart said. “Keep to the point.”

Tas’s face flushed red. He wouldn’t likely back down. “My point is, we don’t want anything to happen to her.” Tas’s attention went back to Victoria. “Your intentions are good, but you don’t have the training or experience to take this on.”

“We could go in cloaked for this mission too,” Victoria said.

Tas sighed so loudly there might have been an audible grunt of frustration mixed in. “Of course, we’ll use everything we have to go in covertly and avoid a confrontation. But your parents won’t have on cloaking suits. If they catch us, you don’t think they’ll figure out why your mother and father are floating out of there? They’ll attack, whether they can see us or not. Even their approximated aims will be good enough to do serious, if not fatal, damage.”

“If I’m there, it won’t come to that.”

Tas went to the center of the semicircle. “Computer, bring up a virtual Tamanacke, static version only. Victoria, come here.”

A virtual Tamanacke appeared next to Tas. Victoria reluctantly got out of her seat and stood beside Tas and the creature. The Tamanacke dwarfed Victoria by almost two feet and a couple hundred pounds.

Victoria tilted her neck back in order to look up at the Tamanacke’s face. She bit her lip at first, studying the image, then put her hands on her hips. “I’m not afraid.”

“This is a virtual image. Believe me, if one of these things were standing in front of you in the flesh, you would be. Anyone in this room would be if they knew what was good for them.”

“Okay, Tas.” Captain Donhart joined the two in the center of the chairs while commanding the virtual Tamanacke gone. “I

think you've made your point. The two of you can be seated. Let's move on."

Victoria and Tas took their seats, with Tas still red in the face and a vein in his temple bulging.

The Captain remained standing in the center of the group. "Commander Paser. I'd like to hear what you have to say."

The commander eyed Captain Donhart. "Are you kidding? With her on the ground able to predict the Tamanacke's every move, there is no risk to her or anybody else."

"There's always risk. To ignore that would be irresponsible," Tas blurted out.

Commander Paser waved his hand through the air as if dismissing Tas. "Okay, then, our risk will be significantly decreased. With more certainty that we'd see them before they see us, what they're doing before they do it, what they're thinking before they think it, we'd definitely increase our odds of success. What's irresponsible is to ignore the added advantage this change in strategy could give us. What does it matter that she's not trained? We can give her that. What we can't give the other, trained soldiers are the skills she has." He leaned toward Tas. "Do you want your sister back?"

"Of course I do!"

"And do you want the team, which may include your son, to come back alive?"

"What kind of a damn question is that?" Tas rose from his seat again.

"Enough," Captain Donhart yelled, stepping closer to Tas. "Paser, finish what you have to say."

Tas sat back down.

## The Anuan Mission

“My answer is absolutely yes. She has to be a part of the ground team.” Commander Paser rested back in his chair.

“Denia,” Captain Donhart said. “What is the opinion of the Council?”

Denia studied the other Council members, then each commander in turn, and finally Victoria. “Her skills *are* undeniably advanced. She would be an asset on the ground in a great many ways.”

Commander Paser nodded his head and puffed out his chest in a display of *I told you so*.

“However,” Denia continued. “She is much too young. She does not have the wisdom that maturity brings. And her skills have only recently presented themselves. They are not honed enough for the high-risk situation she seeks. She still has much work ahead of her. Her skills, even raw, will be an incredible asset remotely. That must be enough. That is the opinion of the Council.”

Denia exuded an energy of calm and peace. Tas and Commander Paser would need that if they were going to come to an agreement without throttling each other first. The two usually got along well. But this situation had struck a personal note with Tas, one he would defend until the end. At least I hoped he would.

“Captain, permission to speak?” Commander Paser stood and waited for the Captain to respond.

“Go ahead, Commander.”

“All right, Tas. I have a proposal for you,” Commander Paser said. “You’re so sure Victoria can’t handle being on the mission team. Then don’t give her the position.”

“What?” Tas said. “Then you agree with me?”

“I didn’t say that,” Commander Paser continued. “I said don’t *give* her the position. Make her *earn* it. I’ll agree that we can’t afford to have a soldier on the mission who can’t hold her own. So, give her the same opportunity you’d give to any other Anuan who wanted to be a member of a ground mission team. Let her try out, just like the others. If she fails, she supports from the ship. But if she passes the test, not just to be a recruit-in-training, but the test to go on this type of mission, then allow her the position she’s earned. It’s what we’d do with anyone else. It’s what we *are* doing for the other Mission Earth members who are with us. That’s the best way to be fair about this.”

Victoria leaned onto my chair arm and whispered in my ear. “What does that mean? What would I have to do?”

“You’d be tested for both physical and mental endurance. You’d also be put through virtual simulation sessions and hand-to-hand combat with one or more of the leads.”

Victoria’s face paled. She obviously hadn’t expected that. I hadn’t either. She’d take a pounding. Certainly, Tas wouldn’t go along with it.

Tas didn’t answer right away. *Was he actually considering this?* I broke out in a cold sweat. Victoria wouldn’t come through a conflict mission tryout unscathed. And who knew what might happen on a mission. I couldn’t let her go through that, and she wasn’t going to give up on the idea. The longer Tas sat in silent thought, the more nervous I became, until I couldn’t take another second.

“Wait!” I stood up. “Permission to speak?”

“What are you doing?” Victoria whispered to me.

“Go ahead, Gaige,” Captain Donhart said.

## The Anuan Mission

“I’ll go in her place. We’re bonded. I’ve experienced her visions. I’ll be the connection between her and the ground mission—the proximity she needs for an extra level of sensitivity. She can feel for the Tamanacke through me.”

“No, Gaige!” Victoria tugged at my arm. “I don’t want you anywhere near the Tamanacke.”

I pulled my arm away from her. “No more than I want *you* near them?”

“Denia,” Captain Donhart said. “Would something like this work?”

Denia nodded her head. “In theory, yes. They’d need to spend some time working on this level of connection, but yes this could work.”

“I’ve been on the ground before,” Gaige said. “I already have some level of training, so I wouldn’t be starting from nothing like Victoria would. She may not be ready by the time we get there. I could be.”

“I can be ready.” Victoria stood up. “I *will* be ready.”

“I’m sorry, my child.” Denia said. “But please keep in mind that participation in physical training will take time from sharpening your metaphysical abilities, and those are the most important components of this mission.”

Captain Donhart nodded. “That’s a good point, Denia.”

“I’ll agree to this,” Commander Paser said. “If Gaige can pass the tryouts.”

Captain Donhart turned to Tas. “What’s your response?”

Tas looked from me to Victoria to the Council. “I’ll agree, *if* he can pass the tryouts.”

My legs went weak, but I held myself as steady as possible. *What had I just done?* The last thing I wanted was to face the

Tamanacke, but at least the risk was off Victoria, and I could live with that. I *hoped* I would live with that.

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When we left Council Hall, Victoria stomped down the corridor ahead of me. “Why did you do that, Gaige?”

“For the same reason you were going to do it. To make sure the people I love are safe. Or, *person* I love—you.”

“I don’t want you down there! A Tamanacke almost killed you the last time you faced one.”

I caught up to Victoria and grabbed her arm, stopping her. “I never faced that Tamanacke. I was ambushed by it. Regardless, I’d take a hundred more of those encounters to spare you of them.”

“But that won’t happen. I can sense them. I wouldn’t be ambushed.”

“And because of your senses, working through me, I won’t either. This is the best scenario. You stay on the ship where you, *and* your skills, remain safe, and I’ll be your conduit on the ground. I’m expendable, Victoria. You and your skills are not.

“You are *not* expendable!” Victoria’s eyes teared up.

“I’m just saying, you and the abilities you have are critical to our people. And, if something does happen, I can manage it better than you. I already have some training. You’d be starting from nothing without much time to build those kinds of skills. You do what you do and let me do what I do.”

Victoria’s tears now sat pooled at the edges of her bottom eyelids, ready to spill over. “I can’t lose you, Gaige.”

“I can’t lose you, either.” I put my arms around her, and she practically melted into my chest. “So, let’s work together to be the



## The Anuan Mission

best damn team an Anuan mission has ever seen, and we'll both be safe. So will your parents and the rest of the team."

She nodded, her hair rustling against my ship suit.

"We *have* to make that happen, Gaige. We *have* to." Her tears finally gave way and rolled down her cheeks.

I wiped the wet streak from her face. "We will."

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## 30 - GAIGE

“Gaige Ardessa, dead,” the computer said.

“Damn it!” I shouted.

“You hesitated.” Leyton, a muscle-bound War Forces’ lead, ordered the simulation to shut down. “Hesitation means dead. I know we don’t inherently seek to harm other beings, but you’ve got to get past that. We can’t let them be the ones to take the offensive, because they *will*. The Tamanacke’s goal isn’t to merely defend themselves. Their goal is to kill all Anuans. It’s *you* or *them*. Which do you want it to be?”

“I know. I know.” I kicked the wall of the training room.

“You saw it happen to me too,” Conner said. “And this is only your first day.”

Training had been interrupted by the repair efforts, but after nearly a week of working with War Forces’ leads, many of the Anuans from Mission Earth still hadn’t adapted to the War Forces’ mentality. Brian, on the other hand, was handling things fine and hadn’t been killed once that I’d heard about.

“It takes time,” Leyton said. “But you’d better adapt in the next week or you’re not going to pass the tryouts. The rest of the War Forces are already working through drills in the Altron’s training room, and the commanders are not going to allow you science-vessel people to slow us down.” Leyton smacked me on the back

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a little harder than necessary. “Until tryouts, we’ll just keep at it. Who’s next?”

“I’ll try again.” Conner stepped into the center of the floor, and I joined the other observers who stood around the edge of the room.

“Simulation twelve,” Leyton said.

The simulation flashed, went blank, flashed again and then scattered into pieces before going blank again.

“When are they going to get all these systems fixed?” Leyton yelled. “Come on, computer. Simulation twelve!”

This time the simulation formed around Conner as it was supposed to and he wove through passages that Brian, being familiar with the secret government facility, or at least parts of it, had helped us map out. With his laser emitter held tight in his hand, Conner stayed close against the concrete walls, glancing in both directions for any signs of a Tamanacke. His heart rate stayed steady, calm. He approached an intersection in the tunnels. His heart rate increased. Would a Tamanacke be waiting around the corner? Conner nudged his head out enough to see.

“Conner Enuvus, dead,” the computer said.

“Damn you!” Conner swung a fist through the frozen, projected Tamanacke.

“You hesitated!” Leyton yelled. “You have to be ready to shoot! And not just have your weapon at the ready but have your brain there too. See it, shoot it! You have to already have made the decision to engage before you even know one’s there because you won’t have the luxury of sensing these things ahead of time.”

Conner and I stayed quiet. Though the commanders knew, the rest of the team hadn’t been briefed about Victoria’s ability to sense the Tamanacke or that she and I would be working together.

The Commanders didn't want me on the team unless it was a fair and unbiased tryout. Even with the skills Victoria would provide me, I had to be able to handle myself and not be an unnecessary, and potentially fatal, burden to the team.

"They don't generate enough heat to use heat-seeking techniques. Maybe some kind of motion detection? But if they're stationary . . . carbon dioxide detection? They breathe, don't they?" Until then, Leyton had been talking more to himself than us. "Do these assholes breathe?" he yelled out.

Everyone looked at each other, but Brian spoke up. "They'd have to breathe, wouldn't they?"

"Screw it," Leyton said. "The Commanders will know what to do about the Tamanacke. They'll be giving us advice from personal experience when they take over the training, so let's just stay focused on the mentality you'll need to pass your tryouts. Next time we'll work on some distraction techniques. Use our mental abilities to knock them off-balance. Maybe throw a sound off somewhere as a diversion. That's one advantage we have—" He looked at Brian. "Well, most of us have, anyway—and we need to use that. So rest your minds tonight, and we'll see you tomorrow."

Brian stayed behind to go over some strategies with Leyton, but Conner and I had had enough. We left recruit training together and headed down the corridor.

"How many times did you die today?" Conner asked.

"Three."

"I thought so. But people were dying so often I lost count."

I rubbed my eyes, tired from straining to see Tamanacke. "We'll get there. And we *will* make the tryouts and join the War Forces on the Altron for mission training."

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“But what if you don’t? You only have a week to prepare for tryouts,” Conner said. “Would Victoria try again to—”

“I *will* make the tryouts,” I said, pushing away that tiny bit of doubt that hovered at the edge of what I was willing to accept.

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## 31 - VICTORIA

“You must not fret,” Denia said once we’d taken our seats for another Council session. “That will only disrupt the focus you need for success. For many reasons, this is a better arrangement than you going to the surface. Gaige is more qualified for ground missions.” Denia paused. “It is true, he is not without issues to overcome. But he will work through those. He must, just as you must work through your concern for his safety. Your minds must both be clear, focused only on the task at hand. And you must *both* train very hard. Your paths will not be easy, but the Council will continue to help guide the development of your visions and will work with you and Gaige together to help you refine your energy exchanges.”

A fog had hung over my world since the commanders agreed to let Gaige try out. I couldn’t shake the fear that he would go to Earth and not come back this time. It was just that, though—fear. But that emotion clouded any real sense of what could be coming. “It’s hard not to worry about him.”

“We understand. But realize, the more you fear, the more likely that which you fear will come to pass. Convert the fear to determination, and you will convert the outcome. This is future. It is still within our control. Do you understand?”

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I closed my eyes and took a deep breath as if to inflate myself to giant proportions. I was bigger than my fear, and I would conquer it! But would Gaige? I shrunk back down. “I do understand. But Gaige experienced something traumatic at the hands of the Tamanacke. Can he overcome that?”

“He can. And he will, or he will not be put in jeopardy,” Denia said. “Now, let us begin today’s session with meditation to help you clear away your uncertainties.”

I relaxed and envisioned myself in a world where Gaige would overcome his fear of the Tamanacke and go on the mission, returning safe and unharmed with my parents. My essence became lighter as the negative outcomes that had been weighing on me floated away, farther and farther and farther, until they disappeared from my sight and my reality. Visions always came easier when I was with the Council, and once I’d put myself in a relaxed state and focused my energies on the Tamanacke compound, one appeared quickly.

My parents still lay in their sedated state with the caregiver watching over them. I wrapped my energy around the caregiver, seeking out who she was, *down deep*. The name Celit came to me as I watched her study my mother. Yes, I recalled the name from an earlier vision. Looking at my mother’s hands and then her own, she compared the two. She wouldn’t want to be treated the way my parents are being treated. She’ll take care of them. I could feel that.

“The caregiver, Celit, she’s with my parents. She doesn’t like what the other two are doing. The two don’t know that, though. They’d be furious with her, especially the leader, Lome.”

Another caregiver came in to take over for the night.

“Celit is leaving. I’m going to follow her.”

“Good,” Denia whispered.

“I feel that she’s going back to her home, her quarters . . . I sense a father and a brother. They welcome her home. The father is going to bed. The brother wants to talk with her . . .”

*“How are the humans?” her brother asked.*

*“Okay, I suppose. They just sleep all the time. Lome wants them kept that way until her people come for them. I don’t like it. It’s like they’re prisoners. And I think Lome has something bad planned for her people when they come. I’m not sure. I only hear bits and pieces when he and Cruck come to check on the humans.”*

*“It doesn’t seem right,” her brother said. “But do what Lome says. Let them play their games. I don’t want you to get hurt.”*

The image faded, and I opened my eyes. “She’s worried about my parents, and her brother is worried about her. Gaige was surprised that as a Tamanacke, she felt compassion, but she’s not the only one.”

Council members exchanged looks, and the mental energy rose, excited but confused as well.

“Are you certain you sense compassion?” Denia asked. “They don’t simply feel less *dark* than the other two?”

“Yes, I sense compassion in both Celit and her brother.”

Denia looked off in the distance and tilted her head this way and that like she was concentrating. “Curious.” She looked back at me. “This caregiver. What is your assessment of her?”

“She’s afraid. Afraid of the two in charge, especially Lome. She’s obedient. She’ll do what they tell her, probably because she *is* afraid of them. She’s kind to my parents, even sympathetic to what they’re being put through. She doesn’t like keeping them captive or drugged.”



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Denia tapped her finger against her chin. “Yes, most curious. It would not be unusual for a female of their species to be submissive to the males, but sympathy, compassion . . . these are not Tamanacke traits, no matter what the gender.” Denia’s hand stilled. “How old would you estimate the Tamanacke caregiver to be?”

“I haven’t heard anything that would indicate an age, but my instincts tell me she’s not as old as the two in charge. Maybe only around my age.”

Denia’s and Galaird’s eyes locked and the energy in the room rose. Once again, I’d given the Council some insight without knowing what it was.

“Can you read this Tamanacke more easily than the two older ones?” Galaird asked.

“Yes, her emotions and feelings are very clear.”

“And the other two,” Denia said, “do you feel compassion in them?”

“No, not one bit.”

“Very well.” Denia inhaled a long, deep breath and let it out slowly. “Let us move on.”

The energy hadn’t subsided. Though Denia was ready to move forward, the Council still had something on their minds.

“Okay,” I said. “But what—”

“We have only speculations,” Denia said. “When we know more, we will share. Can you accept this?”

The last time the Council made such a request was when they thought my mother and father were alive. I wasn’t sure I could be as patient this time. But the Council members were still the most highly regarded beings on Anu, and I needed to respect their decision. “Yes, of course.”

“Thank you, Victoria. We do recognize your patience and thank you for that.” She closed her eyes briefly and bowed her head. “Now, we have an exercise for you to perform. It will assist in strengthening your sensing skills. Seeing visions, even controlling visions, is very useful, but for the mission at hand, you will need to be able to immediately sense the beings themselves. This skill must be unwavering. You cannot miss one detection. To do so would likely mean death.”

*To the ground team, which very well could include Gaige.* That’s how the sentence should have ended, but she didn’t have to say it. I knew all too well who carried the risk if my sensing should fail.

“Okay, what do I need to do?”

“We shall play a game.”

We all moved to the game arena. Some of the activities still weren’t functioning properly due to damage from the anomaly, but others seemed to be working fine.

“You will be playing a game called nenon.” Denia pointed to a particular game room. “Roccold will be your opponent. He will explain how the game is played.”

Roccold stepped forward and motioned with his hand for me to enter first. I did. With its high ceiling, the nenon room looked like a large, glass racquetball court.

Roccold told the room to prepare for a game. “This game is played in reduced gravity.”

I felt myself getting lighter. I bounced up and floated back down, nearly weightless.

“Colored lights will show up on the walls, floor, and ceiling. Your lights will be red, mine will be blue. Both colors will flash

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somewhere in the court, and you will have to touch yours before it goes out.”

“That doesn’t sound that hard,” I said.

“They don’t stay lit for long. In order to get to them in time, you have to know where they’re going to be before they light.”

“Ah. Intuition, instinct, senses. I’ll have to *feel* for them. Just like I’ll be doing with the Tamanacke during our ground mission. Know where they’re going to be. And know it even before they get there, if I can.”

“Exactly. This game will help you with that. One more thing. You’ll have to get to your light before I hit mine in order to win the point.”

“So, I’ll be challenged by my instincts *and* you.”

“That’s right.”

I nodded. “No problem.”

Roccold smiled and pushed his curly black hair away from his face. “Let’s get started then.”

He told the game to begin, and I watched for the lights.

“Don’t look around for them. Concentrate. Feel for them. You know that,” he said.

“Right. I do know that.”

The game kept going without us, lights flashing all over the room in very short bursts.

“Close your eyes if you have to, so sight won’t distract you.”

“No, I think—I mean, I *can* do it. My eyesight won’t interfere. I just had to get settled, that’s all.”

“Okay, start whenever you’re ready,” Roccold said.

I breathed and concentrated. Roccold waited for me to make the first move. I had the urge to jump to the left—to the wall on

my side of the court—and I did. Just then a red light flashed next to me. I slapped it hard.

“That’s it!” Roccold said. “That’s exactly the way to do it. Keep going.”

I pushed hard off the floor, my regenerated foot working as if no damage had ever been done, and slapped a red light on the ceiling on the opposite side of the court just as it appeared. Roccold joined in the game, and we both bounced around the court, slapping colored lights.

“Game complete,” the computer said after a few minutes. “Blue competitor has reached the target goal of twenty-one. Red competitor finishes with eighteen.”

“Nice job,” Roccold said as we exited the neon room.

“*Very* nice job,” Denia agreed.

The rest nodded with eyebrows raised.

“You almost lost your title, Roccold.” Jahnay gave him a playful elbow in the ribs, and I noticed something about their energy—their energy *together*—that I hadn’t noticed before. They were bonded. Talk about the ultimate power couple. “Roccold is the best and fastest among us, and you nearly beat him,” Jahnay said.

“After a few workouts, she likely *could* beat me,” Roccold said. “And, for the good of the mission, I’d happily relinquish the title.”

I was panting, trying to catch my breath. Roccold had put it in a nice way, but I *was* very out of shape. Even with the reduced gravity, I’d probably feel this game for a few days.

Denia ended our session, and after everyone disbursed, I sat outside the neon court and thought back over my time with the

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Council that day, wondering what insight I'd given that sent their energy spiking.

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## 32 - VICTORIA

I'd sufficiently caught my breath after a second day of neon training and wanted to see how Gaige was doing. Making sure to keep my energy suppressed so I didn't unintentionally interrupt, I slipped into the training room. The Mission Earth recruits were paired with War Forces' soldiers who popped out from behind random barriers like they were in a haunted house. With every second that passed awaiting his partner's assault, tension increased in Gaige's muscles, which were ready to spring loose and do damage. Gaige had never considered any scenario but to defend himself, if necessary. Could he change his way of thinking and attack first?

*No.*

Gaige's partner jumped out from behind a virtual pillar and slammed his fist into Gaige's ribs so hard that his breath escaped him in a loud *hmph*. Gaige bent over, clutching his side. The soldier drew his fist back, ready to finish off my weakened husband. I bit my lip, fighting not to run over and step between the two. Before I had the chance to embarrass Gaige, he raised his hand and blocked the soldier's arm. In the same fluid motion, Gaige swung his other fist upward and struck the soldier in the chin. The soldier dropped to the ground like a pile of dirty laundry—one heaping lump of clothing hardly resembling the

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shape of a person at all. Gaige stood over him with tight fists, ready to pound him again.

“Soldier Leyton Messia, unconscious,” the computer said.

Gaige went to the wall and ejected a hidden compartment that contained several cylinders. I recognized them. Gaige had carried one on Earth. *It can elicit various effects on the body*, Gaige had told me. Gaige touched one end of a cylinder to the unconscious soldier’s neck.

After a couple seconds, the soldier opened his eyes. “Nice job.” He reached a hand to Gaige.

Gaige helped him up but immediately grabbed his left side.

“Lesson learned; never give your opponent time to recover himself. Don’t assume any level of damage. Finish the job. Be unyielding.” The soldier wobbled on his feet when he first stood but soon held a stance that matched his words and tone. “Good defense. But you can’t wait until I’ve got an advantage. If I’d been a little quicker, you wouldn’t have been able to recover the situation.” The soldier rubbed his jaw and started packing up his things as he continued to lecture Gaige. “I know this is supposed to be a covert mission, but if they catch us in their facility, we have to be ready to make the first move. Weaken them, finish them, and then take what we came for. Their goal will be to kill us. You’ve got it in you to be tough. But do you have it in you to be relentless without provocation? If not, you’re dead.”

The soldier rambled on, but Gaige didn’t seem to be listening anymore. His focus stayed fixed on the wall behind the soldier and I felt a distance from him. Enough so that I didn’t care about embarrassing him anymore.

“Gaige?” I said, rushing over to him. Gaige’s gaze didn’t leave the wall, and his skin was turning pale.

“What are *you* doing here, Geeah?” Gaige said, still clutching his left side.

“Geeah is your sister Gaige. It’s me, Victoria.”

The soldier stopped packing and looked at Gaige.

“Oh, yeah.” Gaige swayed.

The soldier grabbed Gaige’s arm to support him. “Gaige, can you tell me who I am?”

Gaige finally stopped staring at the wall and, wrinkling his brow, looked at the soldier. “Yeah, you’re . . . you’re . . . I can’t think of your name.”

“Leyton to sickbay. Emergency transition of Gaige Ardessa.”

Gaige went limp the split second before he faded off to sickbay. I ran out of the training room and through the corridor to the ibbs as fast as I could. “Come on, come on,” I said as I waited for the Anuan elevator to open its doors. When it did, I rushed in, the doors closing behind me. “Sickbay, top speed.”

A second later, the doors opened, and I rushed down the corridor and into the main sickbay room. “Where is he?”

“Over here, Victoria,” Zada said from the far side of the room.

The doctor was running her medical wand over an unconscious Gaige. “I’ve already checked the head. No damage there. He does have some broken ribs, but it’s his spleen we need to worry about. It’s ruptured. I have to attend to that right now.”

Feeling completely helpless, I stepped back to give her some room.

Zada commanded the injuries be repaired, starting with the spleen. The beam emanated from the ceiling and split into several separate rays to address each injury. One beam scanned back and forth over his face, lightening the bruise and shrinking a knot over his eye a little more with each pass. Two other larger beams



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worked on his torso—one on the ribs, the other on the spleen. After several minutes, the beams joined together again and withdrew back into the ceiling. The computer announced the repairs were complete, and Gaige lay still unconscious.

“Is he going to be okay?” I asked.

Zada turned to me. “He should be, but I want him to stay here overnight so we can keep an eye on him.”

“Thank God. Yes, of course. I’m staying with him.” I settled into a chair next to Gaige and surveyed the room. The number of bruises were beyond counting. The War Forces’ soldiers had transitioned back to the Altron and were being treated there, but I’d seen just as many marks on them, or pretty darn close. No matter what it took to get my mom and dad back, these Anuans weren’t going to give up on one of their own. The Tamanacke were counting on that.

Conner rushed in, limping. “How is he? Things were so busy in the training room that I didn’t realize what had happened until Leyton told me.”

“Ruptured spleen, broken ribs too. And plenty of bruises.”

“Will he be okay?”

“Should be, physically anyway, but Zada wants to keep an eye on him tonight.”

“Good.” Conner’s face flushed. He pressed his lips together and swallowed.

“What about *you*? Are you okay?”

He nodded and waved a hand toward one of the containers of water Zada’s droid assistant was passing around. After a gulp of water and a long breath, Conner’s bruises didn’t look quite so bright.

A medic came over and checked Conner. He treated Conner's pulled leg muscle and other bumps and bruises with a scanner. Completely healed, Conner could have gone back to his quarters but stayed with me instead. We sat together watching training casualties come and go.

"I don't get this," I said. "It doesn't seem very . . . peaceful. Not very Anuan."

"It isn't. It goes against everything in us. But do you think we can get your mom and dad back from the Tamanacke by acting like a bunch of scientists?"

"I suppose not. But you *are* a bunch of scientists. I know why Gaige is doing this, but for the rest of you, are you sure you don't want to let the War Forces handle this? They're already trained and have the right mindset."

"Tessy was once a part of Mission Earth, family even to those not related by blood. And for those who don't remember *her*, they know my dad and what this means to him—and you. We want to help bring her back. And today was a good day. We're all starting to get the right mindset now—well . . . almost all."

"All except for Gaige, you mean?"

"He'll get there."

"He doesn't have much time. And now this." I pointed to his left side. "It could set him back even further."

Conner nodded and sighed. "He started later than the rest of us, and even before this injury, he had more to overcome."

Looking down at the pink scar on Gaige's neck, I wondered if he *could* overcome what he'd been through in time for this mission. With less than a week until the Mission Earth recruit tryouts, we'd soon find out.

## 33 - VICTORIA

A tiny beeping noise woke me and I raised my head from Gaige's bed. It took me a moment to realize the beeping was coming from Gaige's monitors. Sosha came up from behind me, and I jumped.

"Sorry, Victoria. I need to check Gaige."

"What's wrong?"

"His temperature is rising." Sosha pushed some controls on the scanner and ran it across Gaige's face. "Hmm. It didn't work."

"What didn't work?" I put my hand on Gaige's forehead. "He's burning up. I thought he was going to be okay?"

"We just need to get this fever down."

I moved my hand from Gaige's forehead to his cheek, which was also hot. He lay still, oblivious to my touch. "Why does he have a fever?"

Sosha scanned Gaige's abdomen. "Looks like he's getting an infection." Sosha placed a patch on Gaige's abdomen. "That should help. I'll be back to check on him in a few minutes."

I sat back down and placed my hand on Gaige's arm. "Gaige. Can you hear me?" I waited a moment, but he didn't respond. "Gaige."

"Hmm?" Gaige groaned.

"It's me, Victoria."

"I know who you are," he whispered. "Where are we?"

“We’re in sickbay. How are you feeling?”

“Terrible. What happened?”

“Training happened.”

“Oh . . .” Gaige drifted back to sleep just as the monitors beeped again.

Sosha came trotting over and looked at the display on Gaige’s patch. “Sickbay to Zada.”

“Zada here.”

“I think we’re going to need you in sickbay,” Sosha said. “I’d like you to have a look at Gaige.”

“What’s happening now?” I demanded.

“His infection isn’t responding to the standard treatments.” Sosha placed another patch on Gaige’s abdomen. “I’m increasing the dosage.”

Zada entered the room and went straight to Gaige. She scanned him, checked the displays on his patches, and felt his abdomen.

Gaige groaned.

“You’re hurting him,” I said. “Can’t your scanners tell you what’s wrong without poking at him? And why does he have an infection? We can treat infections on Earth. Why aren’t your advanced medical means helping him?” My worry and lack of sleep weren’t helping the situation, but I couldn’t seem to settle myself. “Please, tell me what’s happening!”

“I’m sorry, Victoria,” Zada said. “This does happen here, though rarely. Normally our standard treatments would take care of an infection like this. We have some other treatments we can use, though.” Zada pressed some symbols on the side of Gaige’s bed, and a cool fog rose around Gaige. “This will help with the fever.” She pressed a medical instrument against his neck. “And this should help with the infection.”

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Gaige began to shiver. “F-freezing.”

“I know, Gaige,” Zada said. “But we need to get your fever down. It’s getting a bit high.”

I took hold of Gaige’s hand. “Hey, I’m right here. You’re going to be fine.”

“Cold.” Gaige’s teeth chattered as he spoke.

“I’m sorry, Gaige,” Zada said. “But this shouldn’t take long.”

Gaige shivered and moaned for the next twenty minutes, but his fever remained high and the spread of infection hadn’t slowed.

“Isn’t there something else you can do, Zada? He’s miserable.” As soon as the words left my mouth, I had the answer. “Of course! Why didn’t we think of this! It’s me. He needs me. I’ve helped heal him before. I can do it again.”

“You’re right.” Zada turned off the cooling fog. “Let’s give it a try.”

I crawled in the bed next to him and snuggled into the crook of his arm, being careful not to touch his side. Heat radiated from his body. “We’re going to get through this, Gaige.”

Zada stayed in sickbay and monitored Gaige’s numbers from a station on the other side of the room. I focused my energy on helping his body fight the infection. Hours went by, and though his temperature stopped rising, it still remained high.

“Come on, Gaige. Don’t you leave me.”

## 34 - VICTORIA

An awareness pulled at me and I jolted awake, realizing I'd dozed off while lying next to Gaige in sickbay.

Wide awake and watching me in the low light of the room, Gaige kissed me on the forehead. "You should be in our quarters in your own bed."

"So should you, instead of getting yourself pummeled."

He smiled. "It's for a good cause."

Zada came over to Gaige's sickbay bed. "His fever broke about an hour ago, and the infection is clearing. He's going to be fine."

"Oh, thank God." I lay my head back on Gaige's shoulder and relished the present. He was here with me, and I didn't want to think about anything else.

By morning Gaige was well enough that Zada gave him the okay to leave sickbay, and we went back to our quarters. He had to avoid anything strenuous for the next two days, including training. That put his readiness for tryouts in jeopardy, and he wasn't happy about that.

"Are you sure you'll be okay while I'm with the Council?" I picked up my shell and tucked it in a pocket, all ready to go.

Gaige huffed and placed our breakfast dishes in the constructor to recycle. "I'm sure. I feel fine. I should be training."

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“First of all, Gaige, you are *not* fine. And, second, I want you to promise me you won’t train today.”

“Only if you promise not to make another request to go to the surface if I fail tryouts.”

“You’re not being reasonable, Gaige.” Before he could come back at me with the same comment, I put my arms around him. “Look, I know you’re upset about this setback, but please, don’t let this affect your mental state. That’s just as important as the physical training.”

He put his arms around me, too, and held me tight against him. “I’m sorry. It’s just . . . there’s a lot at stake. But you’re right. The mental is what’s going to hold me back, and I can still work on that. I’m going to training.”

“But . . .” I pulled away from Gaige. “I thought we just settled that.”

“Don’t worry.” He kissed me on the forehead. “I’m just going to watch.” He tapped a finger to his temple. “Work on the mental.”

“Ah, good.”

“Now go. You’re going to be late.” Gaige turned me around and gave me a nudge toward the door. “I’ll be fine.”

I left Gaige in a better mood than I’d expected earlier and went to my session with the Council. While spending the night in sickbay, I’d been too distracted to work on receiving visions, but I was confident something would come during my Council session.

“Seek out the leader and his assistant without starting with your parents this time,” Denia said as soon as we’d all settled in for my session. “You must free yourself from that link.”

Ignoring the pull of my parents, I imagined myself floating high above the compound. I felt for the presence of the two beings

Denia wanted me to seek out—Lome and Cruck. I recognized their heavy essences from before and forced my focus to go to them. They were together, as they seemed to usually be.

“I have them. Lome is talking to Cruck and a group of other Tamanacke males sitting around a large table . . .”

*Holding a marker in his fist, Lome drew an X on a whiteboard between two circles labeled Mars and Earth, but closer to the circle for Earth. “At about this point, a ship could be visually detected from Earth so scrambling their signal will no longer be effective. They’ll have to cloak their ship then. Earthlings won’t be able to detect a cloaked vessel, but we will. Our sensors will pick up a low-level distortion in certain bands of the electromagnetic spectrum. We’ll follow that anomaly as they come right to us.”*

“They’ll be able to detect us once we cloak. Not the ship itself, but some anomaly the cloaking device causes.”

*“You only anticipate one ship?” one of the Tamanacke asked.*

*“Tas and his Anuan accomplices killed off most of our women and children,” Lome said with a snarl. “They will never expect our numbers.”*

“They only expect one ship. Their numbers . . . they have more than we would imagine. How many more, Lome. How many?”

*Lome tried to mark something else on the board, but the marker’s ink was fading. He threw the marker against the wall, where it burst open, pieces flying. “Primitive means! It baffles me that these humans can even figure out how to procreate!” He slammed his fist down on the table and snorted, nostril slits flaring. “Soon, we will be done living in the dirt like worms, limited by these humans’ control of this planet.” He growled, straightening himself. “But first . . .”*



## The Anuan Mission

My concentration waffled along with the vision. “They won’t stop with this—” I couldn’t breathe.

“Victoria,” Galaird said. “Focus on the task. The rest we’ll deal with after.”

“Listen to Galaird.” Denia reached over and put a hand on my arm. “Focus. This is critical information.”

I took a moment to catch my breath, slow, steady, and the vision gradually came back.

*“Our latest data is old, over twenty years, but at that time, the fastest Anuan ships could travel from Anu to Earth in about four months. We’re estimating half that time, just to be sure we’re prepared.”*

“They’ll be watching for us. They’ve estimated our arrival time right.”

*Lome walked around the room as he spoke to the other Tamanacke. “They’ll no doubt enter our compound in cloaking suits. Since we can read the frequencies of the smaller cloaking devices, this will only serve to slow them down. We’ll let them penetrate the facility until they’re too far down to be transitioned out, then we’ll kill them!” He stomped on the largest piece of marker on the floor.*

I jumped but focused hard to hold onto the vision. “Our cloaking outfits won’t do us any good. They can detect those. They won’t oppose us until we’re too far into the facility to be able to transition out.”

*“Candar, I thought we were going to let them live for a while. Maybe draw their rescue teams into our trap?” another Tamanacke said.*

*“Yes, we’ll allow them to live for a time, while we lure more of them down. The longer we toy with Tas Enuvus and the rest of the Anuan murderers, the more enjoyable this will be!”*

*The Tamanacke hooted.*

My body and my energy were becoming shaky, but I held tight to the vision.

*“That’s not the best part,” Cruck said.*

*“Cruck speaks the truth,” Lome said. “The best part will be that after we’ve toyed with them, we’ll kill the ones we’re holding then fire on the ship and destroy them all. Who cares if the Earthlings see the spectacle? We’ll be done hiding like moles then. By the time Anuan reinforcements could arrive, we’ll have this planet and all its military resources well under our control.”*

“No. Oh, no. They can shoot our ships down. And they’re not going to stop there!” My hands began to shake beyond my ability to keep them steady.

Denia floated her chair closer. She put her hands around mine and held them tight. “We’re right here with you, my child.”

I squeezed my eyes shut, forcing my energy to stay locked on the Tamanacke. Drawing strength and calm from Denia, I stayed with the vision but could hear my own heartbeat pounding in my ears.

*“Their transition distance used to be two hundred fifty thousand miles,” Lome said. “I have no doubt they’ve increased that distance in the past twenty years, but our firing range is currently five hundred thousand miles and could be even more by the time they get here.”*

*The Tamanacke cheered with grunts and hollers.*

As hard as I tried to hold onto the vision, it faded, and I sat back in my chair, feeling like an old dish rag, limp and worn out.

## The Anuan Mission

“Take your time, Victoria,” Roccold said in a slow, comforting voice.

I rested, trying to gather strength and control of my jittery nerves. After a few minutes my heart rate slowed, and my shaky body quieted. “As of now, the Tamanacke have a firing range of five hundred thousand miles but are working to improve that by the time we get there. They’re going to kill us all, and then they’ll turn to Earth . . . I hate the Tamanacke.”

Roccold locked onto me with his intense brown eyes. “The Anuans’ transition range is currently approximately a million miles. It is unlikely the Tamanacke would double their firing distance by the time we arrive.”

As for your feelings,” Denia said. “They will be what they will, but do not let them control your actions. Hatred will drive rash, reckless behavior. *If* you allow it. Do not allow it.”

“I understand. We knew they were using my parents as bait. I suppose I didn’t expect them to invite us to sit down to tea, but hearing them talk about killing us so nonchalantly . . . and they’re not going to stop there. We have to be successful.”

“And that we will, my child. Working through Gaige with the power you hold will remove a great many obstacles. As for the Tamanacke’s future plans, we must focus on this mission and set that aside for now.” Denia scanned the rest of the Council. “This has been a very productive session. You are coming along quicker than anticipated, but your energy is very low now and your mood lower. However, before we close this session, we would like to share . . . These Tamanacke youth, very early twenties and younger . . . they are not like the others. They are not like those we remember from the days of the Tam-Anuan war. Something has changed in this generation. You made us aware of that with

your visions in which you detected compassion in these younger Tamanacke. As a result, we have been working to detect them. We have succeeded. Our success has been limited to slight awareness of their existence. On a few rare occasions, we have picked up a hint of an emotion. This is a major shift where the Tamanacke are concerned. This indicates a fundamental change in their genetic makeup.”

“What caused it?” I asked.

“We do not know for certain. We can only speculate. We will strive to gain more where these youth are concerned. But, if things become troubled during the mission, these youth may prove sympathetic. It is a very slight possibility but worth knowing. We have shared this information with the commanders. We recommend you go home and rest now. You must keep your mind sharp.”

## 35 - VICTORIA

I lay in bed with Gaige, both of us exhausted. Tryouts would be tomorrow. After fully recovering, Gaige had gotten several more days of training in, but even after focusing on his mental blocks during his recovery, his hesitation during simulations was still getting him killed. Virtually, anyway. He was the only one of the Mission Earth team members who hadn't mastered the warrior mentality. With Gaige mumbling in his sleep next to me, I knew it had more to do with his experience than the Anuans' inherent resistance to violence.

"No!" Gaige sat bolt upright, covered in sweat. With his hand curled into a fist, he punched me right in the soft spot at the base of my neck.

I flew off the bed, landed hard on the floor, and scrambled to my knees trying to catch a breath.

"Victoria!" Gaige yelled, wide-eyed.

I tried to take a deep breath, but only a wheeze of air squeaked through my windpipe.

"Emergency transition to . . ."

\*\*\*

I woke in sickbay with Gaige staring down at me. I inhaled a deep breath. The raw flesh in my throat burned, bringing tears to my eyes, but at least I could breathe.

“Repairs have been made, and the swelling is going down. It’ll be completely gone soon,” Zada said, holding a medical wand over my throat.

Gaige squeezed my hand a little too tightly. “I’m so sorry, Victoria.”

“Don’t be . . .” My words skipped out in sore croaks, barely intelligible. “You didn’t . . .” I swallowed slowly, bracing myself against the pain. “Hesitate.”

“You’re not a Tamanacke. I should have hesitated.”

Every word had rubbed my throat like sandpaper across an open sore. Trying to stay out of the way of Zada’s medical wand, I gently touched my fingers to my throat and shook my head. Gaige and I had other ways to communicate besides the spoken word. *“You thought I was. You’re ready to face them.”*

Gaige laughed under his breath. “Only you could make something positive out of this.”

*“It is positive.”*

“The swelling’s down. Now for the pain.” After another minute, Zada removed her wand from my neck. “All done.”

I swallowed without pain. “Thank you, Zada.”

Gaige and I left sickbay with Gaige holding a steady hand on my back. When we reached our quarters, he pulled down the sheet on our bed. “Let me help you.”

“I’m fine, Gaige. You don’t have to worry over me. I want to get these clothes off first anyway.” I tugged my top’s magnetic closure open and pushed the shirt off my shoulders, letting it fall to the floor.

## The Anuan Mission

“I know you’re fine *now*. But I feel guilty.”

“I know you feel guilty, but you don’t have to.” I kicked out of my pants and underwear and added them to the pile of clothes on the floor. Climbing into bed without bothering to recycle my clothing, I snuggled down into the soft, air-filled surface and pulled the sheet over myself. “I’m wondering, why did you react so quickly this time?”

Gaige squatted next to the bed. “Tomorrow is my tryout. I know if I don’t pass, you’ll be back meeting with the commanders, trying to convince them to let you go on the mission. I can’t take the chance of them allowing it. I have to protect you. I *will* protect you.” He kissed my throat with the lightest touch of his lips.

The words *I can protect myself* stopped at the edge of my lips. His breath warmed my neck, and his presence, so close to me, felt good. Like I’d been given water after a long drought. Life had been too busy and completely focused on the mission. We hadn’t spent much time on each other.

“Be with me,” I said.

“But you’re hurt.”

“Zada healed it. There’s not a bit of pain left.”

He kissed my neck again. And again. His breathing grew heavy, and I knew it wouldn’t take much convincing. I pulled him closer to me. He climbed into the bed, convincing accomplished.

It felt good to have his body moving with mine, like this mission didn’t exist. It did, though. But for a little while, we could at least pretend that it didn’t.

## 36 - VICTORIA

Anyone who had permission to observe the tryouts—the commanders, the captains, the Council, and the rest of the ground team—were in Callon’s training room. The joint commanders stood in the center of the room, reciting the rules for the physical portion of the tryouts, and people lined the walls. Much of the mental endurance would be tested in the simulators, but the team members still had to prove they could handle themselves in hand-to-hand combat. When the commanders finished going over the rules, Conner, the first recruit, stepped into the center of the room. So did Leyton.

The countdown started. As the seconds passed, Conner’s muscles tensed and his fists closed tighter. When the chime sounded, Leyton punched Conner in the face so fast I barely saw his arm move. But it certainly had. Conner stumbled back. He hadn’t been the aggressor he needed to be to face the Tamanacke—that would go against him—but perhaps he could turn things around in the simulator phase. Leyton struck Conner again before Conner regained his balance, but Conner managed to block Leyton’s fist with his left arm and land a punch to Leyton’s gut with his right. Leyton didn’t seem to be affected much and charged at Conner like a maniac, throwing one punch after another in rapid succession. Conner blocked a few and even



## The Anuan Mission

managed to return some blows, but Leyton caught Conner in the mouth with a punch that caused blood to fly from Conner's lip.

My stomach turned, and I squeezed my eyes shut. "No," I whispered, willing Leyton to stop, willing the whole barbaric event to stop.

Something hit the wall with a loud thunk, and the whole room gasped. I opened my eyes, and Leyton lay against the wall, several feet away from Conner.

"What happened?" I asked Jahnay, who was standing beside me.

She pursed her lips and cocked her head, her blonde ponytail swaying behind her like a pendulum. "I think *you* happened."

The joint commanders turned to Denia, but she was looking at me.

"I feel a break is prudent," Denia said to the commanders.

"Agreed," said Commander Paser. "Recruits, ground teams, I'll call you back when we're ready to resume."

"Council members," Denia said, "please come with me to the ship's Council Hall. Victoria, I'd like for you to come as well."

Once we were settled in Callon's Council Hall, Denia wasted no time getting started. "What were you thinking during Conner's tryout, my child?"

"I was thinking that I didn't want Conner to get hit anymore. I wanted Leyton to stop. I wanted it all to stop. Those tryouts are barbaric."

"As I suspected." Denia tapped her chin with her right forefinger and scanned the faces of the Council members.

"So, do you think I stopped Leyton by merely thinking it?"

"We do," Denia said. "And that is most unusual."

“Gaige told me Anuans could only move objects, not people with wills of their own.”

“That’s correct,” Galaird said.

“I didn’t mean to force him to do something against his will. I just couldn’t stand to watch that fight go on like that. I didn’t mean to actually affect it with my thoughts. I didn’t think that was possible.”

“We understand,” Denia said. “This could be most useful in rescuing your parents, though. We must start working with Gaige immediately to see if this is a skill you can exchange with him or at least *learn* to exchange.”

“He hasn’t made the mission team yet.” Still seeing the blood fly from Conner’s lip, I touched my own, hating that Gaige was going to be subjected to the same kind of pounding. “And the commanders want him to make the team on his own merit so there’s no chance of him being a liability during the mission. There’s a possibility he might not make it onto the ground team.”

“We are aware of that,” Galaird said.

“Yes, we are,” Denia added. “In order to respect the commanders’ wishes, you must not observe or connect with Gaige or anyone else for the remainder of the tryouts.”

“I understand.”

“Very well. I shall inform the joint commanders of what happened during Conner’s tryout and let them know to proceed.”

We all waited in Council Hall while Denia spoke to the joint commanders in person. She returned shortly and took her seat. “The tryouts will resume immediately. We shall wait here for the results.”

I wanted to be there for Gaige—for Conner, Brian, and the rest of the Mission Earth members too—but mostly for Gaige. He’d

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crossed a hurdle when he punched me in the throat, and I wanted to be there when he showed the rest of the team he'd gotten past his issues.

The Council made small talk, trying to include me in their conversations, probably as a way of keeping my mind from unintentionally going to Gaige and disrupting his tryout. It was the most I'd ever heard from them.

Galaird talked about Anu in days far gone—ninety years, sometimes more. His white beard and wrinkles made him look older than the rest but, based on his stories, he had to be at least one hundred. It made me wonder just how long Anuans lived. He also spoke of his family and how my spunk, as he called it, reminded him of his two daughters. His cheeks flushed with pride every time he mentioned them.

Roccold and Jahnay, the youngest in the room aside from me, playfully bantered back and forth with each other, sometimes including me and Galaird, sometimes not. Roccold's and Jahnay's energies intertwined so completely when they were together socially that it was sometimes difficult to separate the two.

Denia stayed quiet, perhaps tapped into the tryouts. After some time, she raised a hand for the group's attention. "Tryouts have completed."

I started to lunge for the door but stopped. "May I?"

"Yes. Go. Be with Gaige."

I ran to the training room, hoping to catch Gaige and the rest of the group before they left. When I entered, most of the people had dispersed, but the joint commanders and a group of the competitors still milled about.

Gaige heard, or felt, me enter and turned in my direction. Bruises covered his face, blood puddled at the left edge of his fat lip, and I could barely see his right eye beneath the swelling.

“Oh my God!” I ran to him, hands out toward his battered face.

“I’m fine.” Gaige caught my hands and smiled a big, dimpled smile, causing a drop of blood to trickle from his split lip.

“Why are you smiling? You look like one big ball of pain!”

“Zada will have this cleaned up in no time.” He released my hands. “Now give me a congratulations hug.”

“Wait, you made it!” I put my arms around him. “When I saw your face, I forgot about everything else. For a moment anyway.” But that moment had passed now, and I held Gaige, praying and sending positive energy out to the Universe for his safe return from the mission.

“Yes, I made it. Everyone still in the room made the team.”

“I’m sorry I wasn’t here for your tryout,” I whispered in his ear. “I—”

“You did that to Leyton, didn’t you?” He whispered back.

I nodded.

“We’ll talk later.”

I let go of Gaige, turning to the other cut and bruised faces. “Well, I guess congratulations are in order.”

Responses came back with “Thank you, Victoria.” A few voices I recognized, Conner’s among them. And one “Thank you, Tori,” came from the group.

“Brian.”

Brian stepped out from the back of the cluster. “In the flesh.” Not one scratch or bruise showed on his face, though I knew all those from Mission Earth remaining in the room had tried out.

## The Anuan Mission

“Are you sure about this? I know you want to contribute, but there are other ways. This could be very dangerous.”

“I’m aware, and I’m okay with that.” He smiled. “Really. I’m in my element with this stuff. Engineering was a detour I had to make. Not all detours get you where you need to go, though.” He took my hands and squeezed them. “We’ll get your parents back.”

I squeezed his fingers in return. “Thank you.”

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## 37 - GAIGE

The ground team, complete with eight new Mission Earth recruits, anxiously awaited the arrival of the joint commanders in the training room of the lead ship Altron—the ship that would be command central for the mission. The harmless, milky white space of the training room would soon be filled with simulated dreary tunnels and dimly lit rooms, Tamanacke lurking around every dank corner. All eyes went to the entrance of the room when the door gently glided open, and Tas and Commander Paser walked through. Paser held a thick, black rod about two feet long in his right hand.

“Let’s get started,” Tas said. “I know most of you have already been training in one form or another, running drills or working toward tryouts, but now is when we get to the real work. Computer, Tamanacke, static version, but full composition.”

A Tamanacke appeared next to Tas and Commander Paser. Not a semitransparent image but a solid, and scary, form.

Paser struck the Tamanacke in the abdomen with his stick and a loud crack rang out in the room. “He’d have barely noticed that.”

Tas circled the Tamanacke. “These things have few weaknesses. Their skin is like armor, thinnest on the face but tough to penetrate even there. For the most part, an Anuan’s fist is worthless against them. The only truly vulnerable locations on

## The Anuan Mission

the Tamanacke's body are the eyes and a soft spot in the front of their necks, right here." Tas had to reach up to thrust a finger at the base of the Tamanacke's throat. "Penetrate this area with anything—laser, bullet, knife . . ." He poked the spot again, harder. "I wouldn't rely on a finger. There's no armor in this spot, but the skin is still pretty tough. But penetrate this spot, and a Tamanacke will die within minutes."

"In general," Paser said. "It's never a good idea to take these things on without a ranged weapon, so avoid hand-to-hand combat all together, if possible. The Tamanacke have a reach far beyond ours."

Tas lifted the Tamanacke's arm. Paser held his own arm out next to it, showcasing the difference—almost a foot.

"If they get one swat at you, you're dead. They don't miss." Tas dropped the arm and looked at Gaige. "As long as they can see you, that is. And they'll see us. We can't rely on cloaking suits. They have a means to detect the frequencies the suits put off, so the outfits would only get in our way."

One of the team raised a hand. "Sir, outside of this soft spot on the neck, will bullets or lasers penetrate their skin?"

Commander Paser answered. "We call it skin, but it's more like thick scales. Lasers will penetrate if they're set to a high enough intensity, but complete penetration isn't always instantaneous, and they're not going to stand still for us. A high-impact bullet will, but by the time it penetrates the skin, there's not much momentum left to drive it into the body. All you'll get is a wound and not one that will stop them. We'll be using the most powerful weapons we have against them, but the only way they'll be useful is if you aim for the eyes or the vulnerable spot on their necks. They may have some protection for their necks, but because of

their physiology, they're not able to cover the spot closely. It will interfere with their breathing. If they have the neck protection, you'll have to find the right angle to avoid the shielding."

Another hand went up. "Sirs, if we can't avoid a physical confrontation, do you have any advice?"

"If you can get to them, go for the eyes," Tas answered. "A wound there won't kill them, but it will definitely put them at a disadvantage if they can't see. We'll talk about some other strategies as we go through different virtual scenarios."

"Sir, can they be gassed?" A team member in the back asked.

"Good question," Paser said. "They can be. And they are allergic to oils from certain types of pine and cedar trees. The oils will be part of our strategy since they will have no effect on us."

"Let's talk about the Tamanacke's mental and emotional mindsets," Tas said. "Winning and honor are everything to the Tamanacke. Dying in battle is considered an honor for them, so they'll be relentless. They don't have the same regard for family as we do. They're loyal to family to the extent that they uphold the family's strength or position. They'll avenge a perceived slight to their family for their own sakes—to uphold the honor and strength of their household, and thus themselves. But they aren't capable of deep, loving feelings the way humans are. They would never rescue a loved one the way we are planning on doing. They would consider it a weakness to sacrifice an army and ships—which would weaken their power and position if lost—for two beings. Tessy and her husband would have been left to die at another's hands then celebrated as having died honorably. They'd avenge their deaths in some way, though. Again, more as a show of the strength of their houses to deter any future slights than anything else."



## The Anuan Mission

Tas and Commander Paser continued to brief the team about the Tamanacke, but the power Victoria could have over the Tamanacke wouldn't be shared with the entire team until the Council knew whether or not Victoria and I could perfect that skill. If we couldn't connect seamlessly enough for me to utilize her newly discovered ability for the mission, Victoria would be back in front of the mission commanders making another request to go to the surface herself. With her new ability, she could now very well get her wish. I cringed at the thought.

The large, virtual Tamanacke stared at me, almost daring me to fail and serve Victoria, small and delicate, up to him.

I turned my head away from the briefing and the ominous Tamanacke at its center.

## 38 - VICTORIA

The commanders released Gaige early so he could work on the metaphysical portion of his training with me and the Council.

“Welcome,” Denia said to Gaige as he approached the neon court. “The Council has been anxious to work with you and Victoria. We are dealing with a level of skill we’ve never seen before. It has much potential in keeping the Anuans safe, especially during the tenuous mission ahead. The Council is excited to witness such a historic advancement in Anuan abilities.”

Gaige bowed his head. “Thank you, Denia. I’m glad I’ll be able to help.” He glanced at me. “Victoria *is* exceptional.”

“That she is. But, although you are bonded, you will likely have much work ahead of you to function *flawlessly* together at the level you must achieve. There must be no wavering, no disconnect, ever. To do so could mean death. That is harsh, but that is reality. I feel you understand this.”

“Yes, we understand.” I took a small step closer to Gaige so that our arms touched. I wanted to grab him and never let him go, not even for this mission, *especially* not for this mission. It had to take place, though, or we’d leave my parents to the Tamanacke forever. I didn’t like either choice. I interlocked my pinky with Gaige’s. He took my hand and smiled down at me.

## The Anuan Mission

“Gaige, we will begin with a friendly game between you and Roccold. Victoria, you shall only watch. No interference. This will give us a baseline by which to measure your progress.”

“I understand,” I said.

A tight ponytail held Roccold’s black curls back from his face, and his gold ship suit had been replaced with a snugly fitting jumpsuit and odd shoes—black fabric, no laces, and heavy-treaded, light-colored soles that wrapped up around the sides. Roccold was here to win or at least give it his best.

Gaige tipped his head to Roccold and eyed his outfit. “Friendly game, huh? I know how good you are at this, Roccold. I don’t think you need all that for me.”

Roccold laughed. “Nothing halfway.” He slapped Gaige on the back and stepped to the side. “You first, my friend.”

Gaige entered the court and stretched his muscles while Roccold talked to the computer and set up the game.

“Ready?” Roccold asked Gaige.

Gaige stretched his neck from side to side, bounced up and down a couple times, then fixed himself into a squatted stance. “I’m ready.”

“Pick your color,” Roccold said.

“Red.”

“I’ve got blue then. Computer, start.”

Roccold had barely finished saying the words when he sprang onto Gaige’s side of the court and slapped a blue light, with Gaige still flying toward his own light. First point to Roccold. The second set of lights flashed. Gaige had already shot off like a bullet, arm extended toward his light, but it went out with Gaige still several feet away. Second point to Roccold. And so it went. Gaige managed to win one point when a light appeared right next

to him. He clearly knew where the lights would appear, but Roccold always knew sooner.

When the game ended, the two—sweaty and breathing heavy—stepped out of the glass court.

“No place to go but up.” Gaige accepted a towel from Galaird and wiped the sweat from his face.

“Roccold *is* a Councilor, so this was to be expected. I have yet to hear of him losing.” Denia looked at me and smiled. “Though he has come close.”

I bowed my head to hide my own smile. I’d stepped into an amazing life and had floated effortlessly to the equivalent of the most gifted citizens in my new world—by reason of mere genetics. To rise higher would take a lot of work, I knew. But I was up to it. I *had* to be.

“Gaige, Roccold, rest for a moment,” Denia said. “We shall then run a baseline with Victoria helping.”

Gaige and Roccold sat on a bench outside the court and drank some water while the rest of the Council talked, and I watched some of the unusual games going on in the other courts. A few of the games still weren’t working but of the games that were, one in particular held my attention. In it, a series of different colored lights illuminated on the floor, and the players jumped to each spot like a game of whole-person Simon.

“Gaige, Victoria,” Denia began, “take a moment to clear your thoughts of all outside distractions and focus only on each other.”

I turned from the Simon-like game.

Gaige took my hands in his. “That’s not hard.” He stared straight into my eyes and only the two of us existed. “*We’ll get your parents back.*”

“*I know we can do this.*”

## The Anuan Mission

*“I know we can too. Together, we can do anything.”* Gaige released my hands. “We’re ready.”

“Very well.” Denia tipped her head at Gaige and Roccold, and they reentered the court.

I sat down on a bench facing the court, inhaled through my nose, and exhaled slowly through my mouth. “I’m ready.”

Gaige told the computer to start the game.

*“Left.”* I peered through the glass, focusing my thoughts at Gaige as strongly as I could while he shot to the left. The light blinked out just as Gaige’s fingers brushed the wall. First point to Roccold. Again.

*“Up, up!”* But Gaige was already on the way to his next light. And so was Roccold. Point two to Roccold.

Gaige and I managed to get one point by the end of the game. No better than Gaige had done by himself.

Gaige exited the neon court first. “We *have* to be better than *this!* We’re bonded, and she’s one of our gifted.”

“Yes, you are.” Denia didn’t have the slightest worry in her energy. “And, yes, she is.”

Gaige took the water container I extended to him and gulped a few swallows. “Then why didn’t we do better?”

“You are not utilizing your unique situation properly. That is not surprising. You are still relatively new to each other.” Denia reached out and pinched Gaige’s left arm.

“Ouch!” Gaige rubbed the red spot that Denia’s pinch had caused. “I’m sure there was a point to that, Denia, but what was it?”

Denia turned to me. “Did you feel that?”

“No.”

“*Feel* him. *Be* him. Don’t *tell* him. You are beyond words, spoken or otherwise relayed. You know that. You just need to be reminded of its applications.” Denia gently pushed Gaige and me closer. “*Feel* him. Connect deeper. Sense each other. Then there will be no time lost in the communications.”

Standing face-to-face with the group on my right, Gaige and I stared at each other, then closed our eyes. I *could* feel him and remembered doing this before. After he’d been injured by the Tamanacke, I’d wanted to make sure he was okay. He’d told me to find out for myself, so I’d know for sure, and I stepped inside him and *did* know that he was well. *That’s* what we needed to do now.

A sharp pain tweaked my right and left forearms simultaneously.

“Ouch!” Gaige and I both said together, opening our eyes.

Denia still stood next to us, her hands pulling back from the arms closest to her—my right and Gaige’s left. A red spot had already formed just an inch or so below the last pinch mark on Gaige’s left arm, and one had formed on my right. I felt the pain in both my arms, though, and rubbed them to ease the sting. So did Gaige. No redness marred the arms opposite Denia, but the pain was there. I’d felt his pain, and he’d felt mine.

“That is how you must connect,” Denia said. “Practice tonight. Go deeper. Explore the possibilities. Learn your way around each other. *Become* each other. But do not rush what is not ready. We can provide guidance, but all soulmate connections are unique to those involved. Only the two of you can discover each other fully. You shall face Roccold again tomorrow. That will be all for today.”

## 39 - VICTORIA

Gaige and I sat cross-legged on the floor of our quarters, facing each other.

“I remember connecting with you after you woke from your Tamanacke attack,” I said, adjusting to a comfortable position.

“Yes, you went deep enough to experience exactly what I was going through and knew that I was truly recovered. That’s what we have to do now. Except we need to form a two-way link this time. You won’t just be looking around; we’ll be making a connection to one another. Like we did when Denia pinched us, but we have to work on forming a much deeper connection. It’s uncertain how long the mission could take and there will be distance between us during that time. Part of the purpose of us using our connection is to bridge the distance between you and the site. We have to be solid for as long as it takes.”

“Got it. I’m so much stronger than I was after your attack. We’ll do this.” I took hold of his hands. “Let’s start like this. I’ll let go once we get connected to make sure we can do it without touching.”

“That works.” He squeezed my hands. “Ready?”

“Ready.”

I closed my eyes so nothing in our surroundings would break my concentration. I focused on the core of Gaige’s being—a place

I wasn't used to being consistently connected to yet. The personality, the thoughts, the emotions, yes. I stayed with those things always. But having grown up as an Earthling, connecting to the very deepest levels of my partner wasn't part of my muscle memory yet. We knew our connection went all the way to the core. I felt that the first time I saw him. But staying there consistently would only come with time. That time clock had now been put on fast forward. Whether we could get where we needed to be within our compressed timeline remained to be seen.

I felt the essence of Gaige's being. Loving, caring. Strong but cautious. A characteristic etched into his core over years of watching me from afar, praying to the Universe that I'd be okay on Earth. "*I feel you.*" I thought.

*"And I feel you."*

After focusing on each other for a while, we reached a harmonious frequency, totally in sync. Words weren't necessary. Thoughts weren't necessary. We were one. We were where we needed to be. But could we maintain that? We held on to our oneness, testing our endurance.

After a while, a euphoria settled over us. More. We wanted more. We took our connection to a higher level and rose into the universe, focusing on going deeper and deeper into our oneness as we floated farther into the peacefulness of all that was, zooming away from our bodies now. One intense mass of energy reaching for the edges of the universe. Bigger . . . deeper . . . farther . . . until our frequency reached such intense heights it was like being on the verge of a wonderful explosion that would take us to the place which we sought—the edges of time and space. Peace and oneness with everything.



## The Anuan Mission

Suddenly, the thin string of energy that tethered us to our bodies surged with a searing fire and ripped loose, tearing a soul-sucking hole in the center of my body. *My* body. I was no longer one with Gaige. The euphoria had vanished, and I spun out of control through the cosmos. I tried to pull myself back, to find Gaige.

“Gaige!” I opened my eyes and looked up at Zada and an entire medical team. My hands were empty, no longer interlaced with Gaige’s. “Gaige!” I tried to sit up but couldn’t. I turned my head to the side and found him, lying on the floor next to me with blood dripping from his nose, mouth, and ears. “No,” I whimpered. “No.” I reached my hand to my own face and felt the warmth of blood. “*No.*”

## 40 - VICTORIA

I looked down upon my body lying in sickbay next to Gaige. But it was only the shell of Gaige. His essence was with me and the whole of the Universe. Next to our empty bodies, Tas and Daigon sat talking with the Councilors who had no explanation for what had happened. They did admit that the full intensity of my energy was so much higher than they'd ever seen or experienced that it was hard to predict what it might actually be capable of.

*"They'll be okay. Without us, I mean."* An energy floated next to me in the wispy form of Gaige. I'd felt the information he'd expressed. No words or even thoughts. Just a knowing.

*"You didn't have to take form. I'd know your energy anywhere."*

*"Not quite ready to let go of it yet, I guess."*

*"We took things too far,"* I said.

*"We definitely did. How could we ignore the euphoria that exists in this place, though?"*

*"I knew no physical forms existed here. But I didn't realize we could reach a point of no return."* I floated down closer to Tas. His pain caused me to shoot back up above the scene. *"I feel so much peace here. I don't want to go back to the pain and the worry."*

*"I don't either."*

## The Anuan Mission

*“But what about my parents? We can’t leave them with the Tamanacke.”*

Gaige was quiet for a moment as he listened to the conversations below. *“I don’t think we can go back. Our bodies are too badly damaged from the separation.”*

*“Maybe they’ll heal.”*

*“Maybe,”* he said. *“But the pull of this place . . . I don’t know if I can overcome it.”*

*“We should try.”*

I felt a calm contemplation from Gaige that ebbed and flowed from one thought to another. He didn’t want to go back. Then he felt he should go back, for me. Then he didn’t think he *could* go back, even if he really wanted to. Then he was back to not wanting to go. Where he settled on the subject was yet to be determined. Maybe it didn’t matter. If our bodies couldn’t handle reconnecting with our essences, the outcome would be decided for us.

## 41 - TAS

Daigon and I remained in sickbay long after Zada and the medical team disbursed for the night. A medical technician monitored Gaige's and Victoria's statuses from another room and the team could be back in an instant if needed. At the moment, there was no need. The damage had been done, and no outside intervention could fix it. We just had to pray that their bodies could recover. An eerie stillness hung over the room, like we were sitting among silent energies with no more need for their cumbersome containers.

Daigon sat next to his son, eyes closed and head leaned back against the wall after hours and hours of waiting and hoping.

I held Victoria's hand. "You can't go yet. Not like this, destroyed by your own gift. We're so close to reuniting you and your parents. Please hang on." I'd lost count of how many times I'd said those words. Could she hear me? Yes. I knew she could. But did she have a choice in the matter? That, I couldn't answer.

Daigon shifted in his chair and groaned. He opened his eyes and the edges of his mouth drooped as soon as he saw his still-comatose son. "No change, I guess."

"No. No change."

He sighed, rubbed his face, and sat up straighter in his chair. "What time is it?"

## The Anuan Mission

“Late. Well, actually early. The medical staff should be starting their morning shift in about an hour.”

He nodded. “Maybe they’ll find some improvements when they check them over this morning.”

“Maybe.” My words lacked any inflection of positivity. A poor disposition, I knew, brought on by lack of sleep and so many hours spent waiting for a positive sign that had yet to come.

The sickbay doors slid open, and Zada walked into the room ahead of her usual start time. “Have you two slept?”

“I’m not sure it would qualify as sleep,” Daigon said, “but yes, I did shut my eyes for a while.”

“Same here.” I let go of Victoria’s hand and moved away from the bed to give Zada room to check on her.

Daigon and I waited as Zada scanned Victoria’s body then scanned it again. She shook her head. “I’m sorry. There’s been no change.”

She moved to Gaige and scanned him. She started to speak, but only a rasp came out. She cleared her throat but didn’t attempt to repeat whatever it was she’d started to say. She didn’t have to, though. We knew. She lowered her glistening eyes, shook her head again, and walked to the other side of the room.

Daigon and I resumed our positions. What else could we do?

*“Don’t give up.”*

Thinking he’d spoken to me, I looked at Daigon.

But, mouth closed, he raised his eyes from Gaige to me. “You heard it, didn’t you?”

“I did! Zada! Scan them again.”

Zada sprinted from the other side of the room where she’d busied herself in front of a data-filled projected display. She

scanned Victoria first, but her expression remained blank. Then she scanned Gaige. “I’m sorry. Everything is still the same.”

“It can’t be. I heard . . . I don’t know who I heard, but I heard *someone*.”

“Maybe you’re just tired,” Zada said, “and hopeful.”

“I heard it too,” Daigon stood. “Please check again.”

“Okay. Maybe my scanner isn’t working properly. Let me get another—”

Victoria took a deep breath. “It . . . was . . . me. You heard *me*.”

Gaige gasped but couldn’t seem to draw a full breath.

Zada grabbed a device from the wall and put it over Gaige’s mouth. “Come on Gaige. You can do it.”

Victoria reached her arm toward Gaige. “His hand. Give it to me.”

I lifted Gaige’s arm from the bed and placed his hand in Victoria’s. She squeezed it.

Nothing. Gaige didn’t move, and his ragged gasps fell silent.

“Come on, Gaige!” Daigon yelled. “Follow Victoria back!”

Victoria squeezed his hand again. Gaige didn’t move or breathe.

“Zada, why isn’t the artificial breathing working anymore?” Daigon shook Gaige. “Come on, Gaige!”

Zada didn’t answer, just frantically poked at her display.

Victoria rolled off her sickbay bed and fell onto the floor. “Help me.” She extended her arms up.

I lifted her from the floor and attempted to place her back onto her bed.

“No! Gaige.”

## The Anuan Mission

I tried to help her stand next to Gaige, but she pushed me away and rested her body across his. “We made a deal, Gaige. Together! We stay together!”

Gaige still didn’t move.

“He can’t. He can’t do it. He can’t make it back!” A tear streamed down Victoria’s face and she collapsed onto the floor.

“Victoria!” I squatted next to her and put my hand below her nose. “She’s not breathing. Zada! She’s not breathing!”

“Get her on the bed,” Zada said.

I lifted Victoria’s lifeless body back onto her sickbay bed, where Zada immediately began working on her.

Time seemed to slip away, one slow, hopeless second at a time, with each of those seconds taking Victoria and Gaige farther and farther from us. All Daigon and I could do was watch and wait and pray to the Universe to help them come back.

Someone gasped to my left, and I broke my gaze from Victoria. “Gaige!”

Daigon grabbed Gaige’s hand. “Feel me. Come toward my energy.”

Victoria still lay lifeless on her sickbay bed, but Gaige took another breath, deeper and more solid this time. And another.

Zada continued to work on Victoria to no affect.

“Victoria?” Gaige said, eyes still closed.

No one said a word.

“Her hand.” Gaige reached toward Victoria, just as Victoria had done to him earlier.

I placed her hand in his, and he gripped it tight. Gaige’s eyes still remained closed. He said nothing, just took an exhausted breath. After a few seconds, he grinned ever so slightly. “I know,” he whispered.

Several more seconds went by, and *finally*, Victoria took a breath. And another. And another. She squeezed Gaige's hand and opened her eyes. "We made it. We *both* made it back."

I breathed a sigh of relief and silently thanked the Universe.

Gaige slowly opened his eyes. "Why is everybody standing around? We have a mission to get ready for." Gaige smiled then closed his eyes again.

"Perhaps after a little more rest in my sickbay," Zada said, patting his shoulder.

Zada scanned Gaige and Victoria and reassured us that they were now stable, though they had more healing to do. After the two drifted back to sleep to give their bodies the time they needed to finish healing, Zada called Denia in to assess the things beyond the physical.

Denia arrived with a smile on her face. "This is wonderful news. The Counselors and I reached out to them and offered as much energy as possible to help them make their way back, if that's what they chose to do." She stood over the sleeping pair and held her hands over one then the other. "They are energetically healthy, though depleted at the moment. This experience has deepened their connection. They have accomplished what they set out to do."



## 42 - VICTORIA

Gaige slapped another flashing light. So far, fifteen points for him, none for Roccold. I rubbed my fingers, still feeling the hard surface of the glass wall, then I felt the warmth of a pending flash to my right and a sting to the fingers of my right hand from another slap. Point sixteen to Gaige.

Gaige struggled at first with acclimating to my level of energy. But being Anuan and already accustomed to metaphysical exchanges, within a week he had become used to the higher energy enough not to be completely exhausted by it. After just a couple weeks, Gaige easily beat Roccold, even at increased speeds. Though Gaige's days were long and full, his morning drills with the ground teams didn't seem to tire him out enough to affect his afternoon sessions with us. I suppose it was kind of two against one as far as the nenon games were concerned, but Roccold didn't complain about losing his title.

"Great game!" Roccold said as they exited the nenon court. "You too, Victoria. You guys are giving me the first serious competition I've ever had."

The two mopped their faces with towels and chugged some water.

"You are ready for the next phase of your training," Denia said. "We shall move to the ship's Council Hall."

We made the walk from the game arena to Council Hall. An extra chair for Gaige had been added next to mine. We all sat, with Gaige and I anxious for Denia to tell us what would come next.

“To be able to sense the Tamanacke is an integral part of this mission and must be addressed. And you are ready for that.” Denia said. “Gaige, you must use Victoria’s energy to go within and seek them out.”

Gaige swallowed hard beside me, and I felt his reluctance like a cold spray misting over me. He clenched his fists against his thighs and took a deep breath. “I’m ready.” And I felt that he was. His hesitation had passed.

“Very well. Gaige, Victoria, relax and concentrate. Victoria, you concentrate on being open for Gaige. Gaige, you use Victoria’s energy to connect with Tessy first, if you must, but then seek out the Tamanacke. See if you can sense them.”

Gaige pulled on my energy as he focused on the underground facility in which they kept my mother. Scenes of Earth flashed through my mind, then a vision of my mother when she left for her last Earth mission. A mission she would never return from. It was an experience I hadn’t been a part of, but Gaige had. Just like a camera lens coming into focus, the room in which they held my parents snapped into a crisp scene. He had it or was at least getting there.

“I see Tessy and her husband,” Gaige told the Council. “I don’t see any Tamanacke, but I feel something nearby, an essence I’ve only felt once before, during the Tamanacke vision Victoria and I shared. It’s not the dark energy of the two . . .” Gaige’s energy waffled at the mere thought, but he quickly recovered. “It’s the caregiver. Yes, she just stood up and moved into a lighter area of the room. She’s checking a machine next to Tessy. It’s clear. This

## The Anuan Mission

has happened or is happening now. Yes, now. Happening now. That's what I sense. It's an odd feeling, these Tamanacke. She *does* feel for Tessy and Robert, though."

I saw everything Gaige did, but he was in control of where we went, what we focused on. I was just along for the ride now.

Gaige gasped, I jumped, and the vision dissipated. The Tamanacke leader and his second-in-command had come into the room, startling Gaige.

"Tell us what happened, Gaige," Denia said.

Perspiration dotted Gaige's brow. "Two of those..." He paused. "Two other Tamanacke came into the room." Gaige held his hands up in front of him as if holding everyone's concerns at bay. "I'm okay. They just caught me off guard. That's not good, though. I should have known they were coming."

"Gaige," Denia interrupted. "You are doing very well. This is not a setback. You simply need to acclimate to these beings. The younger ones are different, easier. The others will come with familiarity."

"Yes. The caregiver's essence *was* much stronger, and not as... I don't know. Dark. Jolting." Gaige inhaled and relaxed. "Let's try again."

"That will be enough for today," Denia said. "You are progressing quite well, but it is best not to overstress yourselves. You will accomplish nothing by wearing down your energies. For that reason, take the rest of the afternoon to relax and rest your minds, both of you. We will test your assumption about sensing the two, less easily detectable Tamanacke tomorrow."

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We wandered about the ship the rest of the afternoon and evening at a slow, easy pace, enjoying the day and each other—*especially* once we got back to our quarters. Being together physically at our new, higher-level connection brought an intensity to our unions that was hard to describe. And even harder to resist.

Gaige’s slow, deep breathing and quiet essence told me he was sound asleep now. I lay there beneath him, letting the warmth of his body radiate over mine for as long as I could, and then rolled him off me so I could take a good, solid breath.

He draped an arm across my stomach. “Sorry,” he said. “I just needed a minute . . .”

“To recover?” I chuckled quietly.

“Definitely . . .”

His words drifted back into his dreamland. He *was* worn out. Not only from our physical union but also from all the work he’d been putting into our Council sessions and his training with the ground team. Depleted myself, I drifted in and out of sleep until the leader Tamanacke, Lome, flashed in my mind.

Gaige jumped out of the bed and looked frantically around the room, wild-eyed. I knew exactly why. Gaige had seen Lome as well.

“It’s okay! I saw him, too, but you’re here, in our quarters. They can’t hurt you.”

“A vision. How do you get used to that?” He sat down on the bed. “Clear, linear. But not just a vision, a vision of . . .”

“Lome. That was Lome, their leader. You had a vision without us working at it. And Lome is one of the difficult Tamanacke to sense too.”

## The Anuan Mission

“Lome . . .” Gaige said the name slowly, methodically. His energy prickled my skin.

“What is it, Gaige?”

“The leader. He’s the one.” He took me in his arms and held me so tight against his chest that I nearly couldn’t breathe. His heart pounded beneath my cheek.

“The one *what*, Gaige?”

He touched his neck. “The one who . . . did this.”

“He’s the one from Brian’s prison cell?” My vision of Gaige’s encounter replayed in my mind, interspersed with visions that I’d had of Lome with my parents. “You’re right! It all matches. The *feel* of him matches. He *is* the one. Why didn’t I realize that before?”

“It doesn’t matter,” Gaige said.

“It does matter!”

“No.” Gaige’s heart rate slowed little by little. “It doesn’t. We’d be doing the same thing. We’d be going to get Tessy and your father, and you and I would be helping. This doesn’t change anything. It can’t.”

“But—”

“No buts. This is a good thing. I know now. I can be prepared.”

## 43 - VICTORIA

Gaige and I had been improving every day. But I was exhausted and glad to have a few minutes alone while Gaige visited with Conner. While I rested, waiting on him to return, I pulled my one remaining Anuan shell from my pocket and raised it to my nose. Its saltwater scent took me back to our beach. *Our* beach—mine and Gaige’s. A place I used to see us spending sunny afternoons and starlit nights. Could I still see that? My eyes tingled.

I held the shell to my lips, and kissed it gently, reaching out to the future. Would Gaige still be there? I couldn’t tell.

The shell fell from my hand. “No!” I screamed, grasping for the shell. But it hit the table, shattering into pieces. “No!” I dropped to my knees and held my steeped hands to my chin. “Please, please, bring him back safely from this mission. Bring him back to me. *Please*. Why can’t I tell? Why don’t I *know*? He *has* to come back to me!”

I stayed on my knees, praying and begging, until a pair of hands touched my shoulders.

“I’ll be back. I promise you that. Together, remember? We stay together.”

“Gaige!” I jumped up and held on to him, not wanting to ever let go. “What are you doing here?”

“How could I hang out at Conner’s with you this upset?”

## The Anuan Mission

“You felt me?” I swiped my sleeve across my wet face. “Of course you did. I’m an idiot. I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to drag you away from your visit.”

“Hey.” He pulled back and wiped the tears from my cheeks with his thumbs. “This is what happens when you’re emotionally drained. Thoughts slip in that don’t belong. And believe me, these thoughts don’t belong. Trust me. I’ll be back.” He tipped his head toward the shattered bits of shell lying on the table. “And we’ll collect more of those. We’ll make a lamp together.”

I laughed through my tears. “I thought you said Anuans hadn’t had lamps for hundreds of years.”

“Well, we’ll have one now.” He kissed me ever so gently on my forehead. “Now rest. And push those Kian worries away. That’s all this is.”

“You swear?”

“I swear. Now come on.” He led me to our bed and crawled in next to me. We *had* been working nonstop, draining my energy. Rest would fix that and help keep my illogical Kian emotions at bay. They had no place in what we needed to do. As I sunk deeper into my slumber, Gaige kissed my bare shoulder and whispered in my ear. “I’ll always come back to you.”

## 44 - LOME

Kneeling in front of the symbol of our house, I lit a candle for my sister. Then one for my nephew—my son, by all rights, after his father was killed in battle. I recited the Tamanacke vengeance chant. It echoed off the walls of my room like a dozen Tamanacke joined in the rite. I bowed my head in honor of the family taken from me and to the renewed strength of our house to come until the echoes faded and the room fell silent again. I would not fail them, or our house, a second time.

Someone knocked on the door. A primitive means of announcing oneself, but what we were stuck with, for now. I rose and opened the door.

“Lome.” Cruck gave a quick bow of the head. “May I enter?”

I stepped aside and let him in. “What is it, Cruck?”

Cruck’s gaze moved to the candles. “I’m sorry, Lome. I’ve interrupted. I’ll come back later.”

“No.” I went to the candles and pinched their lights out with my fingers. “I was finished.”

“Preparing for our battle with the Anuans?”

“Yes. Now, what is it, Cruck?”

“Forgive me for what I’m about to say, Candar Lome, but I’m wondering . . . if the Anuans are successful—”



## The Anuan Mission

“They will not be!” I slammed my fist against the nearby eating table, rattling the items that sat upon it. “And if by some miracle of their so-called Universe they do succeed in rescuing those two feeble beings we’re holding, they will not escape this solar system.”

“But sir—”

“Cruck! Do you lack faith in our plan?”

“No! Of course not, Candar Lome. It’s just that, the Anuans will be here at any moment, and we still have not achieved the proper adjustments to—”

“I have heard enough, Cruck!” I stood eye to eye with him. “I will forgive your doubt. As my second-in-command, you must consider these things. But do not question me further. I have people working day and night. They will not fail me.”

## 45 - VICTORIA

Zeroed in on today's session with the Council via vision state, I sat on my bed in our quarters, arms wrapped around my knees, and laughed as Gaige used my energy to spin Jahnay in the air of the ship's Council Hall. He eased her gently onto the floor, and she wobbled to get her balance. Gaige and Roccold each grabbed one of her arms until she could steady herself.

"I think we are ready to move to the next step," Denia said with a rare smile on her face.

"*Do you want me to stay here?*" I asked the group mentally.

"Yes, child. We will start in a moment."

While I waited on the group to take their seats, the sight of my bare right foot caught my attention. Not because there was anything wrong with it, but because there wasn't. I ran my fingertips across the top. The skin might have been just a little smoother than before. *Maybe.*

"How did they make it so exact?" I'd asked Gaige after the regeneration boot came off.

"*They didn't make anything. Your body did.*"

"My own body? Like a chameleon?"

"A chameleon?" He'd said with a wrinkled brow.

"They're little lizards," I'd told him. "If they lose a tail, it just grows back."

## The Anuan Mission

“Yes, like a chameleon.”

“But that doesn’t happen to humans on Earth,” I’d said.

“The regeneration boot stimulates your own DNA. Once the process is initiated, your own body takes over. At that point, the boot only remains on for protection until the regeneration is complete.”

The process fascinated me, and I wished they had that technology on Earth.

*“Are you ready, my child?”*

Denia’s words pulled me back from my thoughts. *“Yes, I’m ready. Use my energy as you will, Gaige.”* I dropped back onto my pillow and gazed at the ceiling.

Today we were going to test our ability to override free will on the Tamanacke themselves. I just lay still and relaxed, ready to let Gaige do all the work. That’s the way it would be on the day of the mission.

Gaige had gotten acclimated to their energy and quickly zeroed in on the Tamanacke leader and his sidekick. After a few moments, Gaige wasn’t having any luck affecting the creatures, and I could sense his frustration.

*“Calm, Gaige. You need to stay calm. Don’t waste our energy on frustration. You can do it, Gaige. Get that bastard!”*

Lome’s claw swung down on Gaige. But it wasn’t real. Gaige had experienced a flashback from the night he rescued Brian. The night Lome had nearly killed Gaige.

Gaige’s energy waffled but rebounded with a new level of intensity.

Lome pitched forward, landing on his thick face. He gathered himself and shouted at Cruck. *“See that this path is cleared of debris, or I will have someone’s throat!”*

Traci Ison Schafer

An exhilaration rippled through me. Gaige had done it!

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## 46 - VICTORIA

With only a few days left until we reached Earth, I sat with Tas, Commander Paser, Daigon, and a few other advisors in the mission command center located off the right side of the lead ship Altron's bridge. The mission channel was open to all team members and support functions, and they were running through their strategies over and over, looking for weaknesses.

Without fail, Gaige had learned to use my energy, receiving visions and senses about the Tamanacke and controlling them physically despite their own free will, even when we were on different ships. He'd also been working with the mission team, and training simulations had been going well. *Almost too well.* Worry had started to fester deep within me, but I'd tried to push that negative Earthling mentality away. Was that really all it was—cold feet? Or was there something to it?

Paser and the rest of the command team stood monitoring an illuminated display hovering in front of them. I sat along the back wall, watching and absorbing the energy. Sensing for anything we might need to know.

“Again,” Commander Paser said. “Callon, let's hear from you first.”

Captain Wissic of the Callon reported over the mission com channel. “Callon to remain at one-and-a-half-million miles from

Earth and hold signature scramble. No cloak will be engaged as signature scramble will still be an effective means of staying invisible at that distance. Will hold position there and maintain safety of Victoria, the Council, and other indirect mission support members. Shields will be engaged for the duration of the mission.”

“Correct.” Commander Paser kept his eyes on the readouts. “Baylon?”

Captain Rayan’s voice piped over the mission com channel. “Baylon to move in to just under one-million Earth miles with strong cloak signal, invisible to the Kians but presenting an anomaly that the Tamanacke have technology to detect. Will hold position there as decoy with no transition activity, presenting the illusion that we have arrived but have not initiated our rescue. Shields will be engaged for the duration of the mission.”

“Good! Now for Altron,” Paser said.

From the command center, we could see Captain Donhart standing in the main area of the Altron’s bridge with his crew. But he reported through the mission com channel so all the ships could hear. “Altron to move in with ground mission teams at one million Earth miles and a separation distance from the decoy ship of thirty degrees. Minimum cloaking signal, necessary to stay invisible to the Kians, will be used. The Tamanacke’s focus should be on the stronger cloaking signal being emitted by the decoy ship, Baylon. Shields will be engaged for the duration of the mission, except when transitions are taking place. Slight vulnerability will exist at those moments.”

“Acknowledged,” Commander Paser said.

That slight vulnerability during transitions would be even more concerning after what I’d learned from one of my visions—the

## The Anuan Mission

Tamanacke had long-range firing capabilities. Though not yet able to reach our planned distance, the Tamanacke were working hard to improve that. Therefore, an additional team would be sent down to disable their long-range weapon system, eliminating the risk of the ship being fired on when it was vulnerable.

“Baylon engineering,” Tas said with a tense energy that wrapped around him like a python. “Report on the video loops we’ve been testing in the facility’s surveillance systems.”

“Still undetected, Commander. Their surveillance devices will be ineffective in alerting them to our presence.”

“All ships,” Tas said. “Report transition modes to be used.”

As lead ship and the one that would be transitioning the ground team to Earth, Altron reported first, followed by Baylon then Callon. All ships reported that transition signal frequencies would be rotated at maximum speed to prevent the Tamanacke from locking onto them and accessing the ship.

A queasy feeling settled in the pit of my stomach. I hadn’t found out any information in regard to the Tamanacke transitioning capabilities. Perhaps because they didn’t have any, but the unknown made me nervous. I placed a hand on my stomach, willing it to calm. It didn’t. Another unknown floated to the forefront of my mind to add to my unease: how many Tamanacke were located in the facility? I sensed many more of the younger, more easily detectable ones than the older ones, but I couldn’t quite separate them into individuals. Perhaps because they were housed within close proximity of each other.

My stomach soured as if it no longer wanted to keep my breakfast. I bent forward slightly in my chair and leaned my head down, trying to settle the increasing churn in my gut. Heat rushed

over my body, and my head hurt. I leaned over farther, resting my head against my knees.

“Victoria?”

Someone placed a hand on my back and, startled, I raised my head to see Tas standing over me. The quick motion caused pain to shoot through my temples. “Uh. I don’t feel well.” I lay down on the floor and curled into a fetal position, trying to settle my stomach so I didn’t throw up in front of the entire command team. “We’re missing something. Something critical.”

The command center had gone dead silent watching me.

“Gauge, Denia, report to the command center,” Tas said over the command channel.

Tas squatted next to me. “Somebody bring her some water.”

Within seconds, someone had handed Tas water, and he was helping me take a drink. A thick blanket of heat surrounded my body, and the cool water tasted good, even serving to settle my stomach a bit.

“Victoria!” Gauge ran through the door that led directly from the corridor and knelt next to me, taking hold of my hand. “What’s wrong? I felt, still feel, your . . . unease, but I can’t attach it anywhere.”

“Neither can I, other than it has something to do with the mission. We’re missing something.” Still on the floor, I let go of Gauge’s hand and held my pounding head instead. “I sense . . . I don’t know.”

“Do you think you may just be having last minute nerves?” Tas asked. “It *is* almost time for the mission. That could feel overwhelming and cause anxiety.”

“I don’t think so. I don’t know. Maybe.”



## The Anuan Mission

“I’m here, my child,” Denia said as she entered the room. She sat beside me and placed her hand on my back. “Calm yourself. Find your balance. Then search for the true meaning behind what you’re experiencing.”

I took a deep breath and let my essence float out into the Universe to find a sense of calm. My stomach slowly settled, the pain in my head eased, and the heat smothering me lifted. I reveled in the peace and serenity for a moment then searched out the feeling that had knocked my body out of balance. The heavy sense came back to me, but I held it at a distance, not letting it affect me physically. Still it hovered like a dark, stormy cloud right overhead . . . a dread . . . a finality.

“I sense . . .” The final word stumbled on my lips, but I couldn’t send it out into the world. Didn’t *want* to send it into the world. But knew I had to. “I sense . . . death.”

## 47 - VICTORIA

With the mission on hold waiting for me to discern what my instincts were trying to tell me, I sat meditating among my mentors in our circle of chairs in the Callon's Council Hall. Was it my parents? Some of our team members? Tamanacke? Or . . . I couldn't even think it. Not Gaige. My body tensed.

"You must relax." Denia rose from her chair, moved behind me, and placed her hands on my shoulders. "Relax," she said in a whisper, her calm energy absorbing into my body.

"Thank you, Denia. That helps."

"You're most welcome, my child. Continue to relax. Then focus your energy toward the Tamanacke, but do not force it, only direct it where you wish it to go." Denia didn't remove her hands, and her balanced essence continued to calm me. "Use our energies as you need. We leave them open for your use only."

With the Councilors' energies bolstering my own, I let my mind drift to the surface of Earth and search out Tamanacke within the compound. Not forcing, but merely being aware of their *feel*. Those energies, some darker than others, flooded me. So many of them. *But how many?* I concentrated on that for a moment. Zeroing in closer, fine-tuning my metaphysical *lens* sharper and sharper, until I could detect gaps between the

## The Anuan Mission

Tamanacke energies. So many gaps . . . “There are hundreds . . . maybe thousands of Tamanacke energies!”

“Don’t be alarmed, Victoria.” Galaird stroked his long, white beard while his gaze wandered away from me for a moment, then came back. “No, there is no reason for alarm. If the mission goes as planned, none of the Tamanacke will know our teams were there until it’s too late to do anything about it. We will inform the commanders, of course. But whether they have one or one thousand, if they do not have the opportunity to engage us, their numbers won’t matter.”

“Can you all feel them too?” I asked.

“Not enough to discern numbers,” Roccold said. “We can still feel an energy we’ve never experienced before and can sense a fledgling essence about it—inexperienced, youth—but we cannot sense it enough to separate out one from another. And we still cannot sense the older ones. However, Galaird is right. If the mission goes as planned, their numbers won’t matter.”

“*If* it goes as planned.” Jahnay’s brow wrinkled, causing her to look more like Gaige than a calm-on-the-surface Councilor.

“If,” I repeated. “*If* the mission goes as planned. But will it? Are things about to fall apart?”

“Do you still sense death, Victoria?” Jahnay asked.

I stayed still for a long while, letting my focus remain on the compound and all those Tamanacke energies, soaking them in. Feeling for what they might reveal to me. I sensed my parents too. The longer I concentrated, the more I felt a sense of doom. Of an end. Not simply a completion of something, but . . . “Death . . . yes, I still feel it. But where!”

“Where indeed.” Galaird said. “Can you detect where that death might connect? Calm yourself. Take whatever time you need. Concentrate.”

Denia came around from behind me and pierced my soul with her aqua Anuan eyes. “You can do it, Victoria. But you must settle your energy first.”

I tried to calm myself and search in that void of doom. Whose energy did it engulf? My parents? The team? The Tamanacke? Gaige? Please no . . . “I’m sorry. I can’t tell. I can’t tell.”

“She needs a break.” Jahnay rose. “Why don’t we take a walk?”

Roccold and Galaird got up from their seats, apparently also ready for a break.

A weight lifted from me at the mere mention of some distance from the doom that taunted me. “I think that would help.”

“Yes, it would.” Denia grasped my hands. “Let your mind go far from this for a while. Refresh your energy.”

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Jahnay poked at the simulator display which wasn’t responding. “Hmm, I thought all the systems were back at full capacity.” Just as she finished saying the words, the white-walled room sprang to life around us. “Ah, there we go.”

The smell of sea salt and fish filled the air. The waves, gentle by the time they got to shore, lapped over our feet as we started our walk along the water’s edge. “Thanks for the suggestion, Jahnay.”

“No problem. I love a virtual walk along the beach and this should do you some good. Where did you say this was?”

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“A place called Fort Myers beach. It’s on the gulf coast of Florida. My mom’s, I mean my aunt’s mother, lived there before she died. We’d visit this place often. Not quite as magical as the beach at Nikkoa, but it’s familiar.”

“Yes, familiar things can be quite comforting. And it *is* a beautiful place in its own right.” Jahnay stopped and picked up a seashell. “Oooo, I’ve never seen one like this!”

“That’s called a sand dollar.” I smiled, knowing how I must have sounded to Gaige when I made the same kinds of discoveries on Anu’s beach.

Jahnay turned the shell to look at the markings on the underside, and one of the tiny inside pieces fell from a hole in the sand dollar. Jahnay caught it in her hand.

“People say those look like doves.”

She held her palm closer to her face. “Yes, it does. Quite interesting.” She put the tiny dove back into the sand dollar and gently placed it back on the beach.

“My brain feels like pudding but this walk is helping.” I reached down, picked up a large shell, and tried to skip it into the water. It landed on the surface with a splat then sunk beneath a gentle wave.

“I remember how exhausting it was to first work with the Council. And you’ve got more to bear than just learning.” Jahnay stopped and wiggled her toes in the sand. “I love beaches. The sound of the waves rolling and crashing, the smell of the salty air, and the feel of the wet, gooey sand smooshing between my toes. It’s all so relaxing.” She lifted one foot from the sand and dipped it into the water to rinse it then did the same for the other and started walking again. “You’re doing so well, Victoria. Maybe you’re just worn out. That can make one feel distressed. That

could maybe feel like death to one not used to their metaphysical senses. Do you think?"

"Maybe. I am tired. Worried. Feeling pressure. Lots of pressure."

"That will do it. I bet when you're better rested, relaxed, the feeling of death will clear." Jahnay pointed out over the ocean. "What's that one called?"

"That's a pelican. Watch it."

The pelican dipped into the water and snatched a fish in its bill.

"Not exactly as impressive as your golla birds," I said. "But similar."

"Yes." Jahnay smiled. "Very fun to watch."

Hanging out with Jahnay, not doing much of anything important, helped my body to become a little less tense and my mind a little less heavy. Just when I thought I'd almost completely removed myself from the doom that had pulled me down, a raging Tamanacke appeared. I jumped.

"What is it?" Jahnay said.

*"They're taking too long! Wake the bitch!" Lome screamed to the caregiver. "We're not giving them any more time."*

*"Yes, Candar Lome. Right away." With shaky hands, the caregiver prepared a syringe and shot something into my mother's arm.*

*My mother stirred but didn't wake.*

*"It may take a few minutes." The caregiver kept her head and her eyes lowered. She was terrified.*

*"Let me know when she's fully awake. I need maximum participation from her." Lome left the room in a whirl of rage with Cruck following behind him.*

*"What is your plan, Lome?" Cruck said, catching up.*

## The Anuan Mission

*“These Anuans are taking too much time, planning and plotting. To no avail. They will not rescue the two, and I am tired of waiting for their failed attempt.”*

*“We’ve only estimated their arrival time,” Cruck said. “Perhaps we were too generous in our calculations of how much they may have advanced over the years.”*

*“Even so, perhaps a little torture will get their attention and keep them moving.”*

I gasped.

“What. What is it?” Jahnay said.

I couldn’t answer. I was too focused on the vision.

*“Lome, can an Anuan survive Tamanacke torture methods?” Cruck asked. “Don’t we need her alive?”*

*“It won’t come to that. They won’t delay any longer if one of their own is in distress. But if it does kill her, then so be it. Tas will know it and suffer over it. That will be something. And we’ll still have the other to lure them in. He may not be Anuan, but he’s been accepted by them. They’ll come for him just as they would come for her.”*

*“He doesn’t have their connecting abilities, does he? How will they know?”*

*“Cruck! Stop questioning me! We’ll blast the information out into space channels if we must! But it won’t come to that. As soon as we begin torturing the female, they’ll know, and they’ll come.”*

The two entered a room—a command center or something similar. I couldn’t hold on to the vision any longer.

“That’s it! That must be it! They’re going to torture my mother! Their methods could kill her! That must be what I sensed! We have to do something!”

“Let’s get back to Council Hall,” Jahnay said.

Jahnay shut down the simulation, and we ran through the corridors back to Council Hall. When we entered, Denia, Galaird, and Roccold looked up from their meditating.

“Forgive us,” Jahnay said. “But Victoria had a vision. They’re going to start torturing her mother.”

“That’s where the sense of death is associated!” I said. “We can’t let them kill my mother. We have to stop them!”

Denia tilted her head as she often did when considering something. “We have been collectively meditating on the compound since you left, and we have not sensed death there. “Are you certain about this?”

“I . . . no, but that has to be it,” I said. “Maybe you wouldn’t be able to detect it like I would.”

“Perhaps,” Denia pursed her lips as she looked to the other Councilors. “But you must not make assumptions. To guess and be wrong could have dire consequences.”

“But that has to be it.” Panic gripped my very soul, and I couldn’t let my mother be killed. “We can’t let them torture her. She wouldn’t survive it. We can’t just ignore this—”

“No.” Denia said. “We most certainly will not ignore this. We shall inform the commanders. We merely want you to remain aware. Do not ignore what the universe sends you because your mind has come to its own conclusion.”

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The Councilors and I transitioned to the Altron and burst into the command center.

“Halt drills,” Tas said over the mission command channel. “Teams, take a break. We’ll let you know when we’re ready to begin again. Gaige, report to the command center.”



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Commander Paser stood to give me his seat. “What is it, Victoria? Have you figured out the problem?”

Gaige rushed in and came to my side. “Have you figured out what you’re sensing?”

I waved off Commander Paser’s offer of a seat. “I think so. They’re going to torture my mother!

Tas rose, nearly knocking Commander Paser over.

“They know Anuans close to her will sense that,” I continued. “They’re trying to put pressure on us to start the rescue. Their torture will kill her, and they don’t care if it does. That must have been the sense of death that I felt.”

“We have to go now,” Tas said. “We can’t let that happen.”

“No, we can’t.” Commander Paser remained standing, as did Tas, both coiled and ready to spring.

Denia held up a hand. “We must share. The Council has felt no sense of death at the site. Granted, Victoria has a level of ability we do not possess, but those abilities and her interpretations of them *are* still raw. We feel this is worth noting.”

Tas took me gently by the shoulders and leaned down so he could meet me at eye level. “Victoria, are you sure about this?”

Every single eye in the room bore through me, waiting.

“I . . . I’m sure they’re going to torture her. And I think I sense death. Yes, I do. I sense death. Somewhere. It has to be connected. We can’t let that happen. We can’t let them kill her!”

## 48 - GAIGE

The Council had ordered Victoria to rest for her own sake, and Zada had given her something to help. Victoria slept in our bed now, but she definitely wasn't sleeping restfully.

"We can't let them . . . we can't . . ." Victoria turned over in one direction and then the other. "We can't . . ."

"Gaige to Zada."

"Yes, Gaige."

"Whatever you gave her isn't helping."

"I'll be right there."

When Zada arrived, she examined Victoria and applied a patch to her arm. Victoria immediately calmed and finally seemed to sink into a deep sleep.

"That should do it," Zada said. "The Council wants her in a restful state for the remainder of the day and night, so if she starts stirring again, link to me."

"I understand. She was pretty upset."

Zada nodded. "It's a tough situation. Do nothing, and it's bad. Do something, and it could be even worse. But you've got the most experienced War Forces' teams here and people who have experience with the Tamanacke. Victoria has provided an immense amount of information. She needs to leave what she's provided in their hands now."

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“You’re right. Thanks for your help.” I gave Zada a hug and sat down by Victoria.

Within minutes of Zada leaving, Denia arrived. I commanded another chair from the wall. It floated over next to me, and she sat.

Tessy’s scream echoed in my head. Her anguish rippled through me, causing beads of sweat to cover my body. “They’ve started. This is the second time I’ve felt it.”

“They have,” Denia said. “We do not feel it’s life-threatening, only painful for her at the moment. The Council has been focusing all our energies on the rescue site—both to comfort Tessy and in an attempt to gain visions. The future is always uncertain, but as of now, we still do not feel death at that site. We cannot detect the Tamanacke, of course, beyond a vague recognition of the younger ones. But for humans, we do not sense death there. However, based on the fact that the Tamanacke truly have started torturing Tessy, indicating some merit to Victoria’s prediction, the Commanders have made the decision to proceed as planned. The ships have already been released from their all-stops.”

“I’ll need Victoria for my part,” I said.

“Victoria will have a few days to rest before the ships reach their mission positions. That will be enough time.” Denia put a hand on Victoria’s arm, sat very still for a moment, and then rose. “May peace surround you, Gaige,” Denia said and left our quarters.

I sat next to Victoria with a sense of despair. Not for the mission, but for Victoria, who’d been put in such a desperate position. No matter how things went—good or bad—she’d feel responsible. The good would be okay. The bad would be devastating.

## 49 - BRIAN

I chambered a round in my gun, put it on safety, and secured it into its holster. The echo of that long-ago day had been fading a little more each time I practiced with the team. Nothing could undo the past, but if I could use this gun to help the Anuans . . .

I picked up my boy's photo from the table. "I hope you know how sorry I am and how much I love you. I hope your mother has gotten past the bitterness enough to at least allow you to have that much of me."

I tucked the tiny picture in a pocket of my flight suit and gave it a pat. Before leaving to gather with the mission teams in x-tran, I ordered a glass of water from the constructor that I had no intention of drinking, ran my fingers across the entire length of the window, like I might touch the stars zipping by us, and poked and prodded every futuristic item that even my wildest dreams couldn't have conjured up. I took in every last inch of the world in which I now belonged, including the little droid that floated nearby.

"Well, R2, if I never see you again, it's sure been one hell of a ride."

## 50 - VICTORIA

I, along with the Council, had been transitioned from the safe haven of the more distant Callon to the command center of the Altron to join the mission commanders and advisors. Not ideal, and not what was originally planned, but some of Callon's systems were still exhibiting glitches from our encounter with the anomaly, and they couldn't take the chance of my vision being cut off from the command center during the mission.

So far, Baylon had been effective as a decoy, and the Tamanacke were focused only on it. They had no idea our ship or Callon, which was still out of the Tamanacke's detection range, were there. So far, so good.

Standing next to Tas in the mission command center, I kept my eyes on the x-tran monitor as Commander Paser assembled the teams there—both the teams that would transition down and the Altron's backup teams that would remain there ready to go if needed. All support functions were online and ready, and the backup teams on the other ships were also going through precheck procedures.

“Gauge, Leyton,” Paser said, and the two stepped forward. “We'll see you shortly with Tessy and her husband.”

Gauge smiled and nodded. “Yes, you will.”

“All right, gather your teams.” Paser stepped back and let Gaige and Leyton call their teams forward.

The six men and women on each team gathered around their respective leads for further instructions. The majority were War Forces’ soldiers, but a few Mission Earth faces, Farber included, stood among the *Tessy teams*, as they called themselves—Teams One and Two, officially.

Commander Paser stepped to the other side of x-tran. “Okay, Brian, Gilla.”

Brian and Gilla came forward.

“Disable those weapons,” Paser said.

“As good as done, sir.” Brian, almost unrecognizable in his gear, not only looked different than I was used to, but he exuded a completely different essence today as well, a sort of hunger, primal and deep-rooted.

“Gather your teams,” Paser said.

Brian gave a few instructions to his group while Gilla talked with hers. The teams had gone through everything so many times before, they could perform the actions in their sleep. But it didn’t hurt to go over everything again, I supposed. Brian’s and Gilla’s weapons teams—Teams Three and Four—had a couple Mission Earth faces among them too. Byrne was on Gilla’s team and Conner was on Brian’s—a strategic move since Conner and I were family and had a closer mental connection than others. That would give me some personal link to both mission sites.

After Commander Paser gave the backup teams a few quick words of encouragement, the soldiers secured their flight suit closures, gave their weapon settings one last check, and tightened gas masks, which were much smaller and less cumbersome than those on Earth. The Tamanacke knew that Anuan flight suits and

## The Anuan Mission

plasma shields, used for head protection, would be impervious to bullets. Those shields had to allow them to breathe, though, so the Tamanacke's initial weapon of choice would be gas—something I'd learned from one of my visions. Gas and those deadly claws.

I didn't take my eyes off Gaige for a second, and the moment I said goodbye to him that morning in x-tran repeated in my mind like the video loops we were feeding into the facility the teams were about to enter.

*"You have to let go now." But Gaige hadn't let go either.*

*"I know, just one more minute." I was committing every inch of him to memory. How solid he felt in my arms, how warm. Comforting. Calm even in the face of what he was about to do, but I still felt that small twinge of fear he tried to block from me. I inhaled as deeply as I could and held in his scent for a moment before exhaling. The Earthling side of me always had that little insecurity, that lingering question, what would I do without him? I hoped it was only an Earthling insecurity. "I love you, Alien."*

*"And I love you, Earthling." He pulled back and gave me a full-dimple smile. "I'll tell you that again when I get back." He kissed me, and I savored his taste too. "Now get to the command center. I'll see you soon."*

"Don't forget," Commander Paser continued, "the oils in your canisters are not dangerous when mixed with the gas they plan to release on us, but they might make some smoke. It's nothing to worry about, so let the canisters fly if you encounter any Tamanacke. The oils likely won't kill them, but their allergic responses will cause them enough discomfort and difficulty breathing to slow them down. And they'll likely pass out before the gas clears enough for them to catch a clean breath." He continued to reiterate things they'd already discussed and

practiced time and time again, but they were nothing if not thorough.

One by one, the team leads in all locations gave their all-go until the last one had checked in ready. The blood seemed to drain from my body, and a cold spread throughout me, icy and complete. It was time.

“One last reminder,” Commander Paser said. “Once you get far enough beneath the surface, you’ll be out of communication link. So get back to transition level as soon as possible. Mosup, begin transition sequences.”

“Groups One and Two, prepare for transition,” Mosup, Altron’s x-tran controller, said over the mission channel.

Gaige’s and Leyton’s teams stepped onto the transition pads. My eyes remained fixed on Gaige. *“May peace be with you, Alien.”*

*“You can count on it, Earthling.”* I couldn’t see his mouth beneath the gas mask, but I could see the smile in his eyes and held tight to it.

“He’ll be back,” Tas said to my right.

“Yes, he *will* be back.”

Mosup pressed one of the symbols suspended in front of him. “Transitioning.”

And Teams One and Two faded away.



## 51 - GAIGE

Exactly as planned, we materialized inside the underground facility, just below the main entrance. The stark, dreary place sent a chill of dampness even through my clothing and gloves. Small lights along the corridor in front of us lit the pale concrete walls and our path to Tessy and Robert. Victoria was with me. I felt her; I *was* her. I sensed no Tamanacke in our immediate path, but two lurked in a corridor that branched off about twenty feet ahead. I motioned to the team and pulled out one of my canisters.

When we reached the corridor, I flung the canister around the corner and waited. After a second of thrashing, two heavy thuds echoed down the corridor. Two Tamanacke down. But not for long. Leyton left one of his team members to guard the Tamanacke. If they woke, they'd be exposed to the oil allergens again with no opportunity to notify their leader. I felt two more Tamanacke in a tunnel to my left another twenty-five feet or so ahead, and two more in a corridor about ten feet beyond that. They were patrolling, waiting for us. We hit them with the oils as well and left another team member with each group.

The farther we descended into the facility, the closer I felt Tessy, just beyond the wall up ahead of us now. The only thing we had to do was find the entrance. From Victoria's visions, we knew they left someone in the room twenty-four hours a day, but

the old storage room had no surveillance. I motioned for my team to follow me. My senses told me to turn left. As soon as we turned, the locked door to their room stood in front of us. Tessy's scream rang out through the tunnels. I felt her anguish and the caregiver's as well. I swiped the government entry card engineering had made after studying Victoria's, and the door released.

*"Unauthorized entry! Unauthorized entry!"* shrieked through the room.

The caregiver standing next to Tessy and Robert stumbled back. I grabbed her and put my gun to the center of her throat.

"Celit! Report!" Came a voice from a dated government speaker in the wall above her.

"Turn it off and tell them it was a mistake!" I said.

She swiped her own card through the card reader, silencing the alarm. "I . . . I'm . . . things are . . ."

"We're sending someone down," said the voice from the speaker.

## 52 - BRIAN

We'd easily dropped a few Tamanacke along our way through the tunnels, but the footsteps approaching us now were different, lighter. *Human*.

I motioned for the team to stop and stay silent. We plastered ourselves against the walls. Gilla held her arm out to about her height. I nodded—these were no towering Tamanacke. The cold of the concrete seeped into my back as I listened and waited. Voices lacking the raspy Tamanacke vocals preceded what sounded like two beings. Their words grew louder, more urgent as they approached our location.

“I have no idea! What I do know is, if somebody’s breached this facility, it’s going to be our asses!”

“Necks you mean.”

“Necks, asses, we won’t need either of those if we’re dead!”

I held up my first three fingers.

The team nodded.

*Three* . . . I folded my ring finger down.

*Two* . . . I folded my middle finger down.

*One* . . . My index finger went down, and I clenched my hand into a tight fist.

The team jumped out, grabbing the two, lab coat-clad humans and trained guns at their faces.

“Don’t say a word, or we’ll blow your heads off right here.” I pressed the muzzle of my rifle hard into the forehead of the person on the right. A familiar face stared back at me.

“Brian?”

I blinked. But my vision, and hearing, hadn’t deceived me. “Thom? You knew about these fuckers?”

“Brian, you know these guys?” Gilla whispered.

“I know this one.” I moved my rifle to his chest so I could better see his face. “I asked you a question. Did you know about these fuckers!”

“I’m sorry, Brian . . .”

I poked him with the muzzle of my gun. “Answer me!”

“Yes! Yes. I knew about them.” A drop of sweat rolled down the side of Thom’s face.

“And you never said a word.”

“You didn’t have a *need to know*.”

“Don’t give me that government need-to-know bullshit! This isn’t some Air Force project. It’s a fucking alien invasion!”

“I was scared, okay! One peep out of me, and I’d have been dead!”

“These Tamanacke aren’t all that’s out there,” I said. “That woman they’re holding is from another, kinder race. Help us. Help us help a race that can actually defend against these Tamanacke.”

Thom’s stone-cold gaze bore right through me as if I weren’t even there. Maybe seeing his potential fate. I couldn’t blame him, but we didn’t have time for a drawn-out decision-making process.

I dropped my gun from his chest. “*Please*. We don’t have much time.”

Thom looked to his companion, who made no objection. “How could we help?”

## The Anuan Mission

“Can you get us into the weapon’s control room? If we don’t have to blast in, that might help us get in and out before we’re inundated with Tamanacke.”

He looked up at the camera several yards from where we stood.

“We’re feeding old loops through.” Gilla said. “They’ll never know you helped us.”

He took a deep breath. “Let’s hope not.” He pulled his ID card from around his neck. “The code’s 367511. That’ll get you in.”

I grasped the card in my hand. “Thank you.”

Alarms began screeching all around us.

“They must have detected the other teams!” Gilla yelled.

“Knock them out!” I shouted. “And let’s go!”

The team members standing directly behind the two government employees hit them on the backs of their heads with the butts of their rifles. The two fell to the ground like half-empty sacks of potatoes.

“Sorry, Thom. That was for your own good.”

Our teams ran to the next hall on the right, only to meet two Tamanacke coming our way. Conner threw an oil canister at their feet. One lunged at me, but his claws fell short as he dropped to the ground, followed by his companion. The door to the weapon’s control center lay just ahead of us, the red light above it flashing. They’d gone into lockdown. I threw Thom’s ID card on the ground. It wouldn’t help us now.

## 53 - GAIGE

“We have to hurry,” Leyton yelled. “We’re about to be swarmed by Tamanacke!”

I bent down next to Tessy. “Tessy? Can you hear me?” I gently pulled the collar from her neck. With it came a thick needle that had been embedded in her throat.

“Owww.” She opened her eyes. “Who are you?”

I lifted my gas mask long enough for her to see my face. “It’s me.”

“Daigon?” she whispered.

There was no time to correct her or explain how I’d aged years since the last time she’d seen me. “Tessy, we’re going to get you out of here, but we have to hurry.” I pulled an extra gas mask from my belt and slipped it over her face. Then I picked her up and threw her over my shoulder. Another team member did the same to Robert, and we were out of there at top speed. We collected each group we’d left on guard, tossing another canister of oil at the Tamanacke left behind, so they wouldn’t wake up before we could transition out.

When we got close to our transition point, I felt them. Tamanacke. Dozens of them, with more coming from every direction. Some didn’t want to fight. But they would.

## The Anuan Mission

Tamanacke started stepping out to block our path through the tunnels. Pssst sounds repeated all around us. They'd released their gases. All the Tamanacke had to do was wait. Or so they thought, but the gases would have no effect on us through our masks.

The team started pitching oil canisters as fast as they could. I tossed one at the feet of the Tamanacke closest to me and shifted Tessa's weight on my shoulder. The Tamanacke stumbled, pawing at his eyes and pulling his uniform away from his throat, trying to ease passageways that weren't restricted by any clothing. Some of the Tamanacke passed out. Some fell to their knees. A team member next to me slammed a weakened Tamanacke between the eyes with the butt of her laser gun—a tactic that would have had no effect had it not been for the oils. Leyton struck another in the throat. The ones that got by our physical means of defense, I mentally tossed to the side. When they'd all been incapacitated in one way or another, we ran past and over them and into the area in which we'd been transitioned.

"Transition! Teams One and Two, plus both objectives to transition! Now!" I said. "They know we're here. They're everywhere."

Tamanacke reinforcements poured into the area, stunned by the oils still hanging in the air but not incapacitated like they would have been with the initial release.

"Locking now!" Mosup yelled through the links. "Hold your positions."

"We just have to hold them off long enough for Mosup to get a lock on us!" Leyton yelled.

The teams tossed what were probably their last few canisters at the Tamanacke racing toward us. Using every ounce of Victoria's powers, I mentally tried to hold them back while guns

blasted and lasers fired in a light show worthy of Anu's Freedom Day. But Victoria's energy was weakening, and the harder I tried to hold them off, the less effective my efforts were. There were just too damn many of them now. The Tamanacke continued to advance. Straining against their onslaught, I tightened my grip on Tessy with one arm and reached for an oil canister with the other. My hand met an empty hook on the side of my belt. I looked down, fumbling in the hopes of finding just one more canister. But the hook truly was empty. I raised my head to make another attempt to mentally push them back just in time to catch the sight of a set of Tamanacke claws swinging down at me.



## 54 - VICTORIA

“No! You promised, Gaige! You promised!” I searched the readouts flashing in the air in front of us, not understanding any of the Anuan characters or what information they were giving the team. “What’s going on? Did they transition? Are they alive? Is *Gaige* alive?”

Denia gently touched my arm, her calm essence bringing me back to the group. “You must not be distracted. Feel for him.”

“I can’t feel him. I can’t feel him!”

“Victoria,” Jahnay put her arm around me. “You must calm down. Your energy is so disrupted that it’s not only lost to you, but it’s interfering with the rest of us too.”

“Do not let your Kian emotions take over,” Galaird said, staring hypnotically into my eyes. “You can control them. You *must* control them. You know that.”

I inhaled, wiping tears from my face. “I do know that. I can. I have to.” I breathed, trying to regain my focus, taking what little energy I had left back to the compound, to Gaige’s last location. The fear he’d emitted in our last connected moment clouded everything else. I tried again. And again. But I couldn’t push my worry for Gaige out of my mind enough to see clearly.

Maybe I was too exhausted. Or maybe I just couldn’t accept what I would find beyond that fog.

## 55 - BRIAN

“Screw being stealthy now!” I yelled. “Blow the door!”

Gilla threw a device at the door, blasting it inward. The teams rushed in, tossing canisters of oils at the four Tamanacke working the weapons center computers. Two left their places and started to fight back, swinging wildly at us as they gasped for breath. The mission teams quickly overtook them. I knocked one of the Tamanacke still at his computer in the head with the butt of my rifle. Already affected by the oils, he dropped to the floor. The Tamanacke who remained continued to quickly type commands into the computer. I recognized the process—he was trying to transfer control of the weapons elsewhere. He gasped and coughed so hard he nearly threw up. I shoved the distracted and weakened Tamanacke aside just as the computer screen went blank.

“Damn it!” I yelled. “He’s transferred control!”

Security alerts continued to blare, and more Tamanacke poured into the room. Some of the beasts immediately dropped due to the oil residue. Others swatted at our soldiers, aiming for throats with flared claws, before finally falling over. A few made some sort of contact, and we had soldiers down, but I didn’t know how bad off they were. I couldn’t take the time to check. I jerked open one cabinet after another along the wall, then a panel next to the door,

## The Anuan Mission

desperately trying to find some way to disable the weapons without computer control.

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## 56 - GAIGE

“Gaige! Give her to me!”

I opened my eyes to Leyton trying to pull Tessy from my arms.  
“X-tran?”

“Yes!” Leyton said. “Now give her to me. We need to get her to sickbay, now.”

I released Tessy. “We did it? We did it!”

“Yes, we did. I’ll see you later in debriefing.” Leyton carried Tessy out of x-tran with someone carrying Robert right behind him.

My limbs went numb with an odd sense of confusion at the sight. “Mosup, why didn’t you *transition* them to sickbay? Aren’t the other teams back yet?”

“No, I’m still on standby to transition them onboard.”

Alarms started sounding.

“All hands on alert!” Captain Donhart’s voice boomed over our mission channel. “The Tamanacke are preparing to fire on us. They’ve traced the transition signals to this ship.”

Just then a blast struck the ship that sent us tipping sideways across the room, demonstrating that the Tamanacke had successfully increased their weapon’s range.

I caught myself with my arms when I hit the wall. “They didn’t get the weapons disabled!”

## The Anuan Mission

“It was a weak hit, but a hit nonetheless,” Captain Donhart said. “We can’t afford many more of those.”

I needed to get to Victoria. I ran out of x-tran and toward the mission command center as fast as I could. When I entered, Victoria ran to me.

“Thank God!” She hugged me, continuing to talk without letting go. “I was so worried. But you did it, Gaige! Thank you! And, thank God you made it back safely. But the weapon’s teams—”

Alarms sounded again.

“Prepare for impact!” Captain Donhart shouted just before a second blast struck the ship and knocked us flat onto the floor.

“Don’t we have shields or something?” Victoria asked, scrambling to her knees.

“That is *with* the shields,” Tas told her. “Without and there would be a hole in the side of the ship.”

“I thought that was a *weak* hit.” Victoria said.

I helped Victoria off the floor. “Weak is a relative term.”

Alarms sounded for a third time, but the ship swayed only slightly on impact.

“That hit was significantly weaker,” Donhart said. “They’re losing the source of their power.”

“Victoria report!” Commander Paser yelled.

Victoria, still clearly rattled, tried to regain her composure. She closed her eyes and clasped her hands together. The Council formed a circle around her, each one touching a shoulder. “Brian’s and Gilla’s teams are still fighting back against the Tamanacke. Brian has now managed to damage the electronics supporting the weapons. They’re not going to make it out, though. There are too many Tamanacke. They need help.”

“Back up Teams Five and Six prepare to transition!” Paser said over the command channel.

“No! Don’t send any more down. Let me try to help them.” Victoria held her hands out in front of her, pushing with one hand then the other, sometimes both. “Go. Go Brian. Go Gilla. Run!” The Councils’ hands shook against Victoria’s shoulders. She herself strained and gasped, fingers spread wide, pushing against the air. “Hurry,” she said in a winded whisper. “Please . . . hurry . . .”

A couple of the Councilors wobbled and swayed but never lost contact with Victoria.

“Hurry, *please* hurry,” Victoria said. “I can’t . . . much . . . longer . . .”

Victoria collapsed, and the Councilors fell away from her—Galaird dropping to the floor, Roccold and Jahnay leaning against the nearby wall, and Denia collapsing onto a chair, exhausted but awake. Victoria was not.

I rushed to her. “Victoria!”

“Teams Three and Four to transition!” I heard Gilla say through the command channel.

“Locking . . .” Mosup responded. “Transitioning.”

“Mosup,” Tas said. “As soon as you have the teams on board, transition Victoria to sickbay!”

## 57 - VICTORIA

I floated in a whirl of real and surreal. Which was which, I couldn't tell. Peace and fear, calm and chaos all mixed together like a swirling pinwheel. Where did one blade stop and another start? They didn't. I felt Gaige. I felt the Council. I felt Zada and Tas and Conner and Brian and Daigon and Commander Paser and Captain Donhart and Leyton and Gilla. But most of all, I felt the Tamanacke. They were everywhere. In my mind. In my dreams. In my visions. In my reality? Yes . . . in my reality. And I realized where the doomed feeling I'd sensed *truly* connected.

"Oh, God!" I sat bolt upright in my sickbay bed. "They can board the ship!"

Lome's face looked down on me. He pressed a claw into my cheek, pushing me back onto the bed. Warm blood dripped down the side of my face from where his claw pierced my skin.

"Yes. We can."

## 58 - GAIGE

“Level One Alert!” screeched through the ship.

“Report,” Captain Donhart said.

“The alert was initiated in x-tran,” one of the crewmen responded.

“Mosup report. Computer, give me x-tran status readouts.” A readout appeared in front of Captain Donhart, flashing the transition activity of x-tran. One incoming transition after another continued to display on the screen. “They’re boarding the ship!”

“Affirmative,” Mosup finally shouted through the mission channel. “The Tamanacke have locked onto our transition frequency and are boarding the—” Mosup’s words ended in a huff of air.

Alarms continued to shriek, now interspersed by status alerts in an almost too-mellow computer voice. “Breach in progress. Breach in progress.”

“Shut down x-tran and lock down all sections!” Captain Donhart yelled while his crew frantically pushed controls and reported status values.

I ran for the door to the corridor just as it sealed in front of me. Bolting onto the bridge through the wide opening that connected it to the mission command center, I tried to make it out the



## The Anuan Mission

bridge's exit door, but it was sealed too. "I have to get to Victoria!"

"Not now you don't!" Captain Donhart shouted. "We have to contain this breach first! Engage Delta One protocol," he yelled through the ship's command channel.

Tas and Commander Paser had already begun coordinating both the active and backup teams to assist.

The computer continued in its smooth voice: "Breaches have occurred in the following areas . . . external transitions; level one, sectors three and five; level two, sector four; sickbay . . ."

I didn't hear anything after that. "Victoria's in sickbay! Transition me to her!"

My father, a mostly silent advisor until then, grabbed my arm. "Gaike. Stop it! There's no transition capability right now. Calm down and let them do what they need to do, or this whole ship will be overtaken."

"Then I'll take the corridors. Just let me through the door. There are Tamanacke in sickbay! Every minute we give them with her could mean her death!"

"Gaike! Silence yourself, or I will have you silenced!" Captain Donhart motioned to a crewman, who pointed a tranquilizer gun directly at me.

"The corridors aren't safe. The entire ship is on lockdown," Dad said. "There's no way to get to her. Let the Captain get the situation under control so we can deal with it the right way."

"Keep your emotions intact, Gaike." Denia took my arm and gently removed me from my father's grip, guiding me back into the mission command area where the Councilors remained gathered to one side. "Do not let this emergency cause you to lose yourself or your connection with your wife."

Her energy calmed me down—enough to realize I wasn't helping matters.

“We have to get her out of there, Denia. Tessy and Robert are in sickbay too. The Tamanacke will kill them. That's exactly what they've wanted to do all along.”

“They're on *our* ship, Gaige. It may not seem like it, but we have the advantage. This was a suicide mission for them. A last attempt to save their perceived honor. They will be in no hurry, because her end will be their end too. We realize your energy is low but you are the best one to connect with Victoria. We will assist you. We must find out what the situation is in sickbay.”

I put my head in my hands, regretting that I hadn't taken Victoria to sickbay myself. “*Victoria? Are you okay?*” I got no answer.

“You must settle yourself.” Denia put a hand on my shoulder. “A disoriented mind cannot be open to connections of any sort. Now, close your eyes to the sights here, close your ears to the sounds of this place.”

The rest of the Council surrounded me, placing their hands on my shoulders just as they had done to Victoria when she was helping the last two teams escape. Their high level of energy, even in its weakened state, overwhelmed me. Every muscle of my being buzzed with it.

“Good,” Denia whispered. “Now, reach out again.”

I did, and I felt Victoria. I *was* Victoria. The warmth of a tear rolled down her cheek. No! Blood! The shock of that realization caused my connection to her to falter enough for the command center and bridge activities to come to the forefront of my awareness again and for the words of that smooth, unaffected computer voice to sink in.

## The Anuan Mission

“Casualties reported in the following areas: external transitions; level one, sectors three and five; level two, sector four; sickbay . . .”

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## 59 - BRIAN

Teams Three and Four, the Altron's backup teams, and a few members from Gaige's and Leyton's teams were still in x-tran and far outnumbered the Tamanacke transitioning in. But the Tamanacke were big, strong, and determined to advance farther into our ship.

The backup teams, who still had their oil canisters, deployed them, causing some of the Tamanacke to stagger. Others swathed through the Anuans with their claws like knives through warm butter, making it out of x-tran and into the rest of the ship before the Anuans could stop them. Tamanacke continued to appear, despite the Captain's orders to shut down x-tran.

"Mosup is down!" Gilla ran toward the transition console but was knocked aside by a Tamanacke as another round of the creatures appeared on the transition pads.

Conner ducked, barely missed by a Tamanacke strike, and dove to the floor next to the transition console. He rose and immediately started pushing buttons on the console.

"Shifting control to the bridge." Captain Donhart's voice boomed over the transition channel.

"I've taken the controls, Captain!" Conner said. "Shutting down now!"

## The Anuan Mission

A Tamanacke lunged at Conner, but he jumped aside, barely missing the swinging claws.

“Too late, you bastard!” Conner scrambled away from the Tamanacke.

Feeling the effects of the oils, the beast started to wobble. Conner aimed his gun at the soft spot at the base of the Tamanacke’s neck and got a shot off at just the right angle. The Tamanacke dropped to the floor.

One upright Tamanacke remained in x-tran, but Gilla was in the right position to manage a shot that ended his advance toward the door and the rest of the ship.

No more Tamanacke appeared, but several quick rounds of Tamanacke had already boarded and many had made it out of x-tran and into other parts of the ship.

Tamanacke and Anuans alike lay scattered about x-tran. I kicked one of the dead Tamanacke. “These fuckers are done.” They had, no doubt, planned to fight to their deaths, and they did. Blood dripped from my saturated left sleeve and hit the floor next to the Tamanacke I’d just kicked. But I was alive. I’d deal with the wound later. “Start checking our people for signs of life.”

The Anuans who were able and weren’t already doing so gathered themselves and started assessing our downed comrades. The Tamanacke swaths left no question of status for some. But hope lingered for a few others who’d been able to evade a direct strike in the melee. I knelt next to Farber. His neck remained untouched, but blood covered the lower front of his flight suit. A smooth slit lay open in the material, revealing a gaping wound in his abdomen. I tried to find a pulse but couldn’t, then remembered the Anuan instrument they’d given us. I pulled it from my pocket and waved it over Farber.

Traci Ison Schafer

No life signs appeared on the tiny screen.

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## 60 - VICTORIA

“Good, she’s awake.” Lome pushed past the Tamanacke who stood beside me and jerked me off the bed by the collar of my ship suit. The pressure of my clothing against my throat caused me to gag. I tried to get my fingertips between the material and my neck, but the suit was drawn too tight against my skin. Lome gave me a quick yank, causing my hands to fly free. “Nothing’s going to save you now. You might as well not bother.”

Spots began to form in my vision due to the lack of oxygen. If I passed out, would I ever wake up again? But before I could lose consciousness, Lome threw me against the wall, where the back of my head cracked hard. I slid down onto the floor, right next to two of the medical assistants whose eyes stared straight ahead, wide and fixed. I gasped and scooted away from them as if their deaths could wrap around me and take me down with them.

Lome pulled me up by the arm. A loud pop rang out, and a searing pain ripped through my shoulder. “Ow.” I hadn’t meant to make a sound. He didn’t need to know he’d hurt me.

Screaming at two other Tamanacke, he dragged me back to the bed and threw me onto it. The impact, even with the soft bed, was enough to send pain shooting through my head from the tender spot on the back of my skull. Lome would not show mercy. He had *not* expected us to successfully rescue my parents. He *had*

expected to destroy every Anuan on this mission. Boarding the ship must have been a last-ditch effort to save his pride. An effort he wouldn't waste.

I glanced at the sealed door between my sickbay room and my parents' room. Did he have any idea my parents were that close? If he did, could he get to them? No, as far as I could sense, he felt I was his only outlet for revenge, not only of the past, but of the present—his embarrassingly demolished plan. I would take the full brunt of his anger.

For no apparent reason other than to satisfy his rage, Lome pulled me from the bed with such force that I thought my already injured arm might rip loose at the shoulder. I scurried to get my feet under me. When I was standing, steady, he punched me hard in the left side of the face. "You Anuan bitch!"

I grabbed my face and stumbled back. The room blurred. No matter how hard I tried to remain standing and defiant, I couldn't overcome that punch. I felt myself falling and knew I'd be unconscious by the time I hit the floor.



## 61 - VICTORIA

*“Victoria. Victoria, talk to me.”*

*“Gaige . . .”*

I woke in the same sickbay bed. The coppery taste of blood filled my mouth. My tongue instinctively went to the source: a tooth in my lower left jaw. It lay sideways, barely attached. The pressure of my tongue caused it to fall into my mouth. I tried to reach up with my good arm only to find that I'd been strapped down. I wriggled down in the bed enough so that the strap across the center of my body hit just above the elbow, allowing me to bend it. I spit the tooth into my hand and tucked it in a pocket, wiping my blood-filled hand clean across the front of my ship suit. Maybe the Anuans had the means to fix the tooth. That would be the least of my worries.

“Your attempts to escape will be futile, Victoria Enuvus.” A hand grabbed me by the throat, shoving me closer to the head of the bed, and the strap wrenched tighter around my abdomen.

My eyes searched for the voice. Lome stood over me with the caregiver tucked behind him. Beyond them, against the far wall, Zada stood, shaking with blood dripping from her nose.

*“Victoria?”*

I'd heard Gaige but needed to deal with the matter at hand and didn't have the energy to do both.

“Spencer.” The word came out in a lisp through my sore, swollen lips. “It’s Victoria Spencer.” He didn’t need to know it was now Victoria Ardessa, daughter-in-law of the captain who had initially pulled me from his grasp and one of the same men who’d fought against him during the Tam-Anuan war.

“You’re an Enuvus by blood. That’s all I care about. I will take blood from Tas Enuvus the same way he took blood from my house.” With that, he punched me again. Not hard enough to knock me unconscious but enough to cause a fresh flow of blood from the cut inside my left cheek.

I turned my head to the side and spit the mouthful of blood on the floor. “Why do you hate Tas so much? He was only trying to help your people.”

“Help my people? He murdered my people!” He drew back to hit me again.

Celit stepped from behind him. “Candar Lome, shall I sedate her now?” She looked at me, and I felt sympathy in her. For me. “You should not have to listen to such nonsense,” she added quickly.

I looked Celit in the eyes. Trying to appeal to her, I sent her energy that would tell her we’re not bad people.

“Yes, Celit.” He pointed to Zada. “Tell her what you need to shut the bitch up until I’m ready to poison her.”

Celit approached Zada, who shook her head.

“Give her what she needs!” Lome screamed. “Or you will join your associates along the wall!”

*“Victoria, I’m with you. We’re going to do everything we can to get to you.”*

*“Thank you.”* An acknowledgment was all I could manage; Gaige would feel better hearing something, anything, from me.

## The Anuan Mission

Zada turned toward the constructor, where she and Celit spoke too quietly to hear. After a moment, Celit approached with a syringe in hand. Lome stepped aside to let Celit stand next to my bed.

“But Tas was trying to help his family,” I said to Celit. “The Anuans were trying to help all the Tamanacke refugees. Disease killed your people. They weren’t used to our planet.”

“Silence!” Lome yelled.

But Celit had listened. I felt like she might have even believed, but she came closer, aiming the needle toward my arm.

I had no energy to remove the restraints mentally, so I inched my arm back instead, tucking it tight against my body. “Is that poison?”

Lome leaned over me. “Ahh, so you’re concerned. Well, not yet. You have some time to think about it, just as my family did. When I have the full attention of your people, then we will start the show.”

The caregiver gripped my arm and held it tight. I tried to wrestle free, but young or not, she was a Tamanacke with the strength of a bull. There was no avoiding what was coming. She slid the needle into my arm. I locked eyes with Zada as the liquid flowed cold into my veins. Zada wasn’t worried. Why? She was trying to communicate something to me, but my mind was too fuzzy to get it.

“She should feel drowsy,” Celit explained, giving my arm a squeeze. But I didn’t. Weak and depleted, yes. But not drowsy. “Her eyes should be closing soon, then she’ll be out for a while.” Celit gave my arm another squeeze.

I closed my eyes and let my head drop to the side, just as Celit had wanted me to do. Unconscious—as far as Lome knew.

## 62 - GAIGE

“She’s in pain!” I pounded my fist against the wall of the command center. “We have to work faster.”

Tas looked over his shoulder at me. “We’ll get her out!”

I’d never seen such a look of desperation in Tas’s eyes. Yes, actually, I *had*. All those years ago when the ship was on its way back to Earth after he’d lost connection with Tessy. I just didn’t understand what it could mean at the time. Now, as an adult, I knew all too well.

Tas turned his attention back to his duties, and he and the rest of the team continued to assist Captain Donhart in containing the breach.

I took a deep breath. “I’m sorry for the outburst, Denia. Let’s try again.”

Denia nodded and took my hands. The Councilors were now divided, some helping me, others helping with breach containment. The ship’s computer hadn’t stopped its continual status updates.

“External transitions, secured. Six invaders dead, zero captured. Level one, sector three, secured. Four invaders dead, zero captured. Level one, sector five, secured. Two invaders dead, zero captured. Level two, sector four, secured. One invader dead, zero captured . . .”

## The Anuan Mission

“They’ll die before they allow themselves to be captured,” my dad said.

And the computer continued, “The following locations remain in control of the invaders: level two, sector four; sickbay, room one. All other areas are secure.”

“Continue lockdown on level two, sector four, and sickbay, room one,” Captain Donhart said. “Clear lockdown in all remaining areas. Triage teams, report to your assigned sectors for recovery. Tas, Paser, do what you need to do.”

“All mission teams on Altron report to the bridge,” Tas said over the mission channel. “External teams hold your positions. We can’t risk opening transition channels.”

The recalled teams—bruised, bloodied, and incomplete by about a third—were assembled in the mission command center within minutes. Brian’s and Gilla’s teams, as well as the Altron’s backup teams and a few members from Leyton’s and my teams, had still been in x-tran when the breach began and no doubt took the brunt of the assault. I joined the group and scanned for those closest to me, feeling guilty that I hoped they’d survived because that meant someone else had not. Brian, Gilla, and Leyton all came forward immediately to hear instruction from the commanders. Conner’s auburn hair easily caught my attention, as did the gash above his left eye and dried blood streaking from it. By the condition of the teams, the Tamanacke had likely been affected by released oils, perhaps outnumbered too. Otherwise there would have been no survivable battle wounds. Conner and the rest would be laying on the floor of x-tran with Tamanacke swaths cut through their necks.

My team needed their leader, but I couldn’t serve. “Tas? I need to keep trying . . .”

Tas nodded. “Byrne, take over Gaige’s team for now. Gaige, continue to work with the Council to communicate with Victoria.”

I went back to the side of the command center where the Councilors were huddled. With the ship nearly secured now and most of the lockdown lifted, the Councilors could focus on the two areas still under Tamanacke control, including room one in sickbay. Victoria’s location.

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## 63 - VICTORIA

A sense of peaceful floating filled me. The pain in my mouth and shoulder still persisted but only as a dull ache, not the painful soreness of a lost tooth or the searing pain of a ripped shoulder muscle. Not unconscious, just a bit dulled. Perfect. *Thank you, Zada. And, thank you, Celit.*

*“Victoria, can you hear me?”*

The far-off voice of Gaige whispered in my ear, but I couldn't quite respond. Being connected with Gaige during the mission and then helping Brian's and Gilla's teams had depleted energy that I hadn't had a chance to recover. And whatever the caregiver had injected into my arm not only dulled the pain but also dulled my senses. But I pulled together every scrap of energy I could.

*“I . . . hear you, Gaige.”*

*“Are you all right?”*

*“Just . . . numb.”*

*“We're going to get you out of there. Don't you worry. I need you to help us, though. Can you tell me what the situation is in your sickbay room? I feel you and Zada, is that correct? I can't quite get a feel of the Tamanacke.”*

*“Yeah . . .”* I thought of those two, young medical assistants, with their throats slashed open. Those faces haunted my thoughts.

*“They killed . . .”* Tears started to burn my eyes. I couldn’t let the Tamanacke know I was conscious.

*“That’s okay. We know. The ship has been reporting casualty status to the bridge and command center. The ship’s motion-detection sensors have tracked four of the invading Tamanacke to your room. I can’t get a good enough connection with you right now to feel them. Can you verify this number and tell me what’s going on in there?”*

Yes, Tamanacke. I needed to think of them—to stay strong against them. To stay strong enough to connect with Gaige. I forced the tense energy from my being and refocused myself. *“Four. The leader, his second, another male, and the female caregiver. She’s . . .”* I couldn’t get any more out.

*“I still feel you. I know your energy is depleted. Take your time. I’ll wait.”*

After a moment, I felt as if I could continue. *“Not just depleted . . . drugged too. The drug the caregiver gave me didn’t knock me out completely like Lome intended . . . She did that on purpose . . . She’s sympathetic to my situation.”*

*“Good. What are they doing now?”*

*“I’m in bed one. The caregiver is standing with Zada on the opposite wall. The other Tamanacke are impatiently milling around, talking. They plan to kill me, but they want to torment Tas with it for a while first . . .”* I paused to compose my frazzled and scared energy, but Gaige had already picked up on it. I felt it reverberate back in his own energy.

*“Listen to me!”* he said. *“They’re not going to kill you, Victoria. We’re not going to let that happen. Now conserve your energy. And remember, you have the power to defend yourself against these creatures. You just have to get back there. We’ll*



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*come for you, but the stronger you are, the better. So rest. I'll be right here with you."*

*"Just one more thing . . ." I said.*

*"What is it?"*

*"Please, don't hurt the caregiver. She's not like the others."*

*"You come first, Victoria, but we'll do what we can."*

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## 64 - GAIGE

“Level two, sector four, secured. Two invaders dead, zero captured. One location remains in control of the invaders: sickbay, room one. All other locations are secure.” The sound of the computer voice still reverberated through the command center.

Leyton’s and Gilla’s teams had managed to help secure the last remaining Tamanacke-held location—aside from Victoria’s sickbay room. It wasn’t surprising that her room was still under Tamanacke control. Every place on the ship was manned by War Forces’ soldiers, trained for battle whether participating on the active mission team or not. All, that is, except for Victoria’s sickbay room. Most of the warship’s medical team from Victoria’s room had shifted to the adjacent sickbay room where Tessy and Robert had been taken. Since Victoria had only needed rest and not true medical care, only Zada and a couple medical assistants had been in the room at the time. A lapse in coverage that worked to the Tamanacke’s advantage in every way. Had we known the Tamanacke had the potential to break our transition codes, that lapse never would have happened. But we had a new plan now to deal with the remaining Tamanacke and save Victoria.

Every life was important, but Victoria’s situation had to be handled with special care. She was a future Council member,

## The Anuan Mission

people of our society held sacred and protected at all costs. But she was also my soul mate, and I couldn't imagine life without her.

"Let's do this!" Tas said.

I, along with Paser, Brian, Leyton, Gilla, and my father, whose experience with the Tamanacke had taken him from advisor to the special rescue team that had just been formed, followed Tas to the door. Before we could exit, one of the crew members on the bridge called out.

"Captain! The Tamanacke in sickbay are trying to send a message. Should I allow it?"

Captain Donhart looked to the joint commanders, who spoke quietly to each other for a moment.

"Allow it," Tas said as the special team moved from the command center to the main bridge. "But no return video."

"Bring it up. No return video," Donhart said.

The crewman pushed a few buttons and the display rose in front of us—one big Tamanacke head.

"This is Captain Donhart. You have permission to speak."

"Permission." The Tamanacke snorted. He rolled his yellow eyes and waived a clawed hand. "You amuse me, Captain. I do not need your *permission* to speak. Listen or not. That's your decision. The girl will die regardless."

Tas clenched his jaw. "Lome, you seek revenge that is not justified."

"Ahh, Tas. There you are. I have been *very* anxious for this day." Lome's deep, menacing voice vibrated with a low, underlying growl.

"We tried to save them, Lome." Tas sounded calm, reassuring, but he had to know there was no pacifying these beings.

Lome snorted again. “I believe that like I believe they’ll all come back from the dead. Nearly all our females and children were lost at your hand. You offered help then turned that to your advantage to weaken our numbers, to destroy us! Well look!” He stepped back from the frame so that the entire room could be seen.

Zada and a small Tamanacke—the caregiver—stood near a workstation along the wall to the right. Victoria lay strapped to a sickbay bed at the left side of the room with a Tamanacke standing on each side of her. Two dead medical assistants lay slumped on the floor just beyond them. Blood streaked from a cut in Victoria’s lip and onto her bright maroon cheek. I had felt her pain, but seeing it made me want to reach through the video and strangle that piece-of-shit Tamanacke. Tas looked away.

“See that you did *not* destroy us, and we’re ready to avenge what you took from us. My sister, my nephew, all of them! Do you even remember their faces?”

“Yes! Actually, I do.” Tas stomped up to the image, though the Tamanacke wouldn’t be able to see him. “I remember their faces because I still see them in my dreams, begging for my help! And me and all our medical means not able to do anything for them, except be there, talk to them, hold their hands! So yes, you hollow fool, I do remember them, and I did *not* want any of them to die!”

The leader grabbed Victoria by the hair and yanked her head up off the bed. Her energy spiked from the pain, but she continued to act unconscious. “Well I *do* want *her* to die! I want her to die slowly and painfully like my family did. And I assure you, I will *not* be holding her hand.”

The video went blank.

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Tas's face burned bright red. "Let's go. That son of a bitch is never going to have the chance to torment another member of my family—or anybody else!"

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## 65 - VICTORIA

Done tormenting Tas for the moment, Lome shoved my head back onto the bed and let go of my hair. I suppressed the urge to moan or squint against the pain. I didn't want to do anything that might alert Lome that Celit hadn't given me a real sedative—or at least as strong as he'd wanted—and that what she *had* given me was wearing off already. That might have been bad for the pain, but the thick shroud that had blanketed my metaphysical abilities was lifting.

“Now, Enuvus, Spencer, whatever you want to call yourself . . . it's time to take care of a few debts.” The sour smell of Lome's breath sickened my stomach as he leaned over me. “Celit! Prepare the syringe. You, Anuan doctor bitch, give Celit whatever she needs, now!”

I didn't risk opening my eyes but could sense Zada working with Celit with no ill intentions involved on either of their parts. Lome would kill Celit in a heartbeat if he knew she was about to betray him. I put myself into a relaxed state so I could try and remove the restraints with my thoughts.

*“Victoria?”*

*“Yes, Gaige, thank God!”*

*“The ship is a mess but we're trying to get to you. I feel you getting stronger. I'm connected with you much better now.”*

## The Anuan Mission

*“Yes, I am feeling better. But they’re about to inject me with something. I don’t think the caregiver will be giving me anything fatal, but I don’t know if it will affect me in other ways or not. Assuming I’m right, when the leader figures out that I’m not dying, it will be the end of us all, including the caregiver. You have to hurry, Gaige.”*

*“We’re doing everything we can to get to you. When we get there, do you think you can help us restrain the Tamanacke?”*

*“Maybe one . . . or two, not all of them.”*

*“Okay, you focus on the leader. His taunting session with Tas allowed us to see them and their positions. Have they moved since the video link?”*

*“No, there’s been no movement since then. They’re all just waiting for Celit to bring the injection.”*

“Hurry up, Celit! You! Wake up.” Lome jerked me by the hair again, and I opened my eyes a crack. “Good! I want you to be fully aware what’s about to happen to you.”

Celit scurried up next to me, syringe in hand. I stopped trying to remove the restraints. I couldn’t fight them all off if I got loose anyway. Better to save my energy to help the team subdue the Tamanacke. I just prayed they’d arrive before Lome figured out Celit was betraying him. *If* my instincts were correct, and she was in fact going to betray him. Everything was happening so fast, and there were so many strong emotions on the ship right now . . .

“Inject her, now!”

“Yes, Candar.” Celit slid the needle into my vein. “She’ll be a bit dazed at first but will quickly start to feel uncomfortable.” Celit’s voice quivered. She wasn’t speaking for Lome’s sake; she was speaking for mine.

“I realize that, Celit! It took me years to find just the right drug. Something with quick misery, but slow death. I am ready to witness its full effects. And I am ready for Tas to witness it too.”

I felt fine, awake, alert, but stared straight ahead for a moment then moaned.

“Prepare for another video session with Tas.” Lome leaned closer to me. “Wait. She should immediately start to overheat with this drug.”

“Yes, Candar Lome.” Celit placed her rough hand on my cheek. “I believe she is getting warmer. The drug is working.”

Lome pushed Celit aside. “Why is she not sweating? The drug should make a human sweat profusely!”

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## 66 - GAIGE

“Hurry!” I shouted to the team. “He knows! Lome knows the caregiver has betrayed him. We’re out of time!”

We turned the corner just down the corridor from Victoria’s sickbay room and were met with a closed and charred door.

“This door’s blocked too!” Conner yelled.

“Looks like it took a laser blast,” Gilla said. “What one laser can do, maybe another can undo.” She blasted the door, but it remained closed.

“That way!” Tas pointed in the opposite direction.

“But—”

“There’s a passage,” Dad said before I could finish my protest. “We’ll have to crawl up a ladder to the next section and come down past this door.”

“We’re not going to make it!” I screamed as we all followed Dad up the passageway.

## 67 - VICTORIA

“I . . . uh.” Celit backed away from Lome. “Perhaps the dose was not enough. Shall I inject her again?”

Lome grabbed Celit by her shirt and snarled. “Celit! Did you give her the drug I directed you to give her?”

“Yes . . . Candar . . . I . . . I . . . swear it.”

Lome flung Celit into Zada, knocking them both to the floor. Then it was *you*, Anuan doctor bitch! Lome took a step toward Zada, arm raised and claws extended.

Zada squinted and put her arm in front of her to try and block what she knew was coming.

The door to my sickbay room burst open in a flash of light and smoke before Lome could complete his Tamanacke strike on Zada. Oil canisters exploded around the room, immediately coating me and everything else with a thin, slick film. I focused my energy on Lome, who turned back to me and, staring me straight in the eye, raised a clawed hand. Those yellow-slit eyes glistened and watered in the fog of oil mist but were still piercing enough to stab right into my soul. Everything moved in fast forward and slow motion at the same time. I mentally fought to hold Lome back as the team rushed in. But Lome’s arm, slowed by my efforts, still moved forward. He grunted and wheezed, trying with all he had to finish the Tamanacke strike on my throat.

## The Anuan Mission

And I strained with all I had to stop him. Gaige's energy was with me, but we were both so depleted. Then suddenly, the Tamanacke collapsed on top of me, and the rest of the room snapped into focus.

Gaige was by my side, his arm fixed protectively across my neck. Tas loomed over us. He lifted Lome off me, pulled his knife from the base of Lome's throat with a hard yank, and threw him onto the floor.

"Are you okay, Victoria?" Tas wiped his knife on the pant leg of his flight suit, Lome's dull orange bodily fluids making a wet smudge across the fabric.

"I . . . yes. I am."

Gaige removed the restraints, and I sat up, looking around the room. The team members were settling their weapons back into holsters, and the other two Tamanacke males lay on the floor, eyes fixed. Celit moaned on the other side of the room.

"The caregiver, Gaige. Help her. Somebody help Celit."

"I've got her," Zada called out. "I'm taking her to another sickbay room, clear of these fumes."

I put my arms around Gaige's neck and held him as tight as I could.

"Hold all fire." Commander Paser said into open communication channels that echoed through the ship. "We're secured. All areas are secured! One Tamanacke prisoner."

## 68 - TAS

As soon as I knew Victoria was okay, I ran to the adjoining sickbay room. All eyes went to me when I blasted in. But the only eyes I saw were Anuan blue. “Tessy!”

“Tas!” She stumbled from her bed but soon had her footing and was running toward me.

I took two giant steps in her direction, scooped her into my arms, and hugged her tighter than I’d ever hugged anybody in my life. “I’ve missed you so much.”

“And I’ve missed you, big brother.”

I let go of her but held her close to help steady her weakened body.

“Except, I thought I’d only been apart from you for a couple years while Mission Earth was back on Anu. That is, until the medics explained things to me.” She touched my temple. “Is that a little gray I see?”

“Perhaps a little.”

Tessy’s smile drooped. “Fourteen years. A little gray.” She moved her fingers from my temple to the edge of my mouth. “A tiny laugh line. But you’re virtually the same Tas I left all those years ago. But Victoria. She’ll be a woman now.”

“A lovely young lady you’ll be proud of.”

“I have no doubt.”

## The Anuan Mission

“Come on. Let’s get you back into bed.”

“Yes. I think I’ll need to work on my stamina. Though the doctor told me my muscles are in surprisingly good shape, considering. Robert’s too.”

I’d been so happy to see Tessy that I’d nearly forgotten about Robert who was sitting in the bed next to Tessy’s. “Robert.” I extended my hand to him and we shook. “It’s good to see you again.”

“Good to see you too, Tas.”

My attention went back to Tessy. “I just can’t believe you’re really here. I’m almost afraid if I look away, you’ll disappear, and I’ll realize this was all a dream.”

“I’m not going anywhere, big brother. You can count on that.”

“I’m so sorry, Tessy. Can you ever forgive me?”

Tessy wrinkled her brow. “Forgive *you*. For what?”

“Not watching over you better. Not realizing you were alive. Letting those bastards keep you prisoner all these years.” Tears burned my eyes, but I held them back.

“I was about to ask *you* if you could ever forgive *me*,” she said.

“*You*?”

“You told me Earth could be dangerous and you’d only be able to watch over me when Mission Earth was close by. You warned me of the risks, and I wouldn’t listen. I wanted to be adventurous. Live in this dangerous, wonderful place. Be independent. And look what that got me. I’ve lost my daughter’s childhood.” Tessy burst into tears and buried her face in my chest.

I patted her back, not knowing what to say to make things better.

Traci Ison Schafer

Robert got out of his bed and, taking small, calculated steps, came over to Tessy and put a hand on her back. “It’s going to be all right. We’ll have her for the rest of our lives now.”

Tessy raised her head from my chest and took Robert’s hand. “Yes, we will. Big brother, take us home.”

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## 69 - VICTORIA

I knelt at the memorial we'd made on the ship and read the names etched into the wall aloud. Five lost during the subspace anomaly incident and now seventeen more lost to the mission. I reached out mentally, connecting to each one. Just the day before, I'd said goodbye to many of the mission team in the flesh as they filed into x-tran for the mission. I couldn't believe they were no longer alive. Yesterday seemed like a distant dream, but it was all too real.

"Thank you," I whispered. "I honor your sacrifice now and always." I bowed my head, connecting that sentiment to the echoes of the lives no longer physically with us, and they knew. Debts and regrets and what ifs didn't follow where they went. They were at peace.

After a few more minutes of silent connection, I thanked them again and quietly left to check on those still in sickbay.

When I entered, Gaige stood next to Brian's bed, talking with him. Only two others besides Brian remained.

"Are Dama and Ruse still doing okay?" I motioned toward the two sleeping team members.

"Yes," Gaige said. "They've been resting peacefully and are still expected to make a full recovery."

“And how’s the shoulder, Brian?” I asked. “Any movement in that arm yet?”

“Yes.” He wiggled the fingers on his left hand. “Can’t grip anything yet, but I’m told with Anuan medical technologies it’ll be good as new in a few days. And better the shoulder than the neck, right?”

“Definitely,” I said, thinking of those who weren’t so lucky. “Brian, I don’t know how I can ever thank you and the teams enough—”

“No thanks necessary, Tori. It was the right thing to do.”

I dropped my head. Right or not, I’d let them down by jumping to the conclusion that my feelings had been about my mother and not seeing that the Tamanacke would get a lock on one of our scrambled transition frequencies. It had been a rash assumption—one of the concerns the Council had originally had about training somebody my age.

“Victoria,” Gaige lifted my chin. “The Tamanacke got lucky. Their scans happened to lock onto the right frequency at the exact right second. They couldn’t do it again if they tried. You couldn’t have foreseen that. Remember, the future is unset, and you have no control over what course it may meander onto.”

“Every single one of us went knowing the risk,” Brian said. “And accepting it. The best way to honor those who were lost is for you and your parents to live your lives to the fullest.”

“Speaking of your parents,” Gaige said. “Tas made arrangements for your adoptive parents to transition to the ship tonight for a visit. And he says that Tessy and Robert are alert now and asking for you.”

I couldn’t wait to see the aunt and uncle who raised me again, but a wave of nervous energy rippled through my body at the



## The Anuan Mission

thought of seeing my natural parents for the first time since I was four years old. What would that be like after all these years? “I’ll have to thank Tas for arranging a visit with my aunt and uncle. As for my parents, do they know?”

Gaige nodded. “Tas said they’ve been told how much time has passed.”

“How did they take it?”

“He said it was a shock at first, but the news has had some time to sink in, so they’re getting used to their new reality.”

“Good. Maybe I won’t be a shock to them then. Well, at least not as much.” Regardless of my nerves, it was time to close the gap the Tamanacke had forced between me and my birth parents. “I still have one thing left to do before we go. Meet me outside room two of sickbay in a few minutes.”

\*\*\*

Celit had an entire sickbay room to herself. With only Celit’s bed extended from the wall, the room looked so much larger than usual. The light emitting from the walls had been reduced to match that of the lighting in the underground facility she’d been used to. Celit was awake and nearly recovered from the allergic reaction she’d had to the oils, but Zada stayed close to the young Tamanacke anyway. More for emotional support than medical.

A tear ran down Celit’s cheek, trickling over skin that looked less like the thick, scaly face of Lome. It was softer, smoother. Perhaps just younger. Her heart didn’t feel as tough either. Celit hurt.

I touched her hand. “I’m so sorry, Celit. I know you miss them, but we can send you back to your family whenever you feel up to it.”

“No! I lived through a battle. A battle lost. It would be a dishonor on them. It’s better they think I died. I can never go back.” She squeezed her eyes tight, causing another tear to roll down her cheek. “But what will I do . . .”

From what I’d felt in visions, her brother would probably welcome her home. That didn’t mean the rest, the older generation, would make their lives pleasant. I patted her hand. “It’s okay. You can stay with us. I know we’re not family, but we’ll take care of you.”

“You could accept me? Your enemy?”

“You’re not my enemy. You’re a young girl who was forced to do something she didn’t want to do. And you ended up helping me. If anything, that makes you a friend.”

Celit smiled. “Thank you for your forgiveness, Victoria. You and your people have been so kind to me, but your parents . . .”

“They’ll forgive you too. I know in your heart you didn’t want to be a part of holding them prisoners. Everybody knows that. My parents will know that too. I’m going to see them next. They’re alert now, and the drugs are almost completely out of their systems. They’re going to be fine.”

“I’m so glad,” Celit said, wiping a tear from her face. “You should go. Be with them.”

“I’ll stay with her,” Zada said.

I blew out a long, steady breath, sending my anxiety with it. “Well, I guess it’s time.”

Zada smiled at me, sending comforting thoughts. “It’ll be okay.”

I nodded and got up. “I’ll visit again, Celit.”

When I exited the sickbay room, Gaige stood waiting in the hall. I hadn’t wanted to overwhelm Celit with too many Anuans—

## The Anuan Mission

beings she'd been conditioned to think of as enemies—but Gaige and I wanted to be together when we saw my parents for the first time in years.

Gaige took my hand, and we started walking the short distance to the sickbay room where my parents were recovering. As we walked, I absently ran my tongue across my lower left tooth, back where it belonged, and prayed there wouldn't be another encounter with the Tamanacke. The prayer held hope, but my intuition held dread. Only time, and many sessions with the Council, would tell what the Tamanacke hiding on Earth would do without a leader. But they'd rebuilt their armies for a reason. The Anuans were that reason, and they hadn't planned on stopping there. The leader most likely hadn't kept those plans to himself all these years. And what could the population of Earth be thinking right now? They had to have seen the blasts the Tamanacke sent racing toward our spaceship. Would those government employees tainted or controlled by the Tamanacke have a good cover for what occurred? Or would people start asking too many questions for them to continue to cover what was really going on? That a hostile alien race had settled on Earth. What would all this mean for the future of Earth?

Gaige stopped far enough back from the sickbay door to keep it from opening automatically. "Don't buy trouble."

"You know as well as I do, I don't *buy* trouble; trouble tells me it's coming."

"Don't listen to that right now, then. At this moment, I want you to think about your parents."

I did, and my mother's awareness overwhelmed me. Dozens of memories of us together flashed through my mind—birthday parties, baking cookies, going to the park. I gasped.

“What?” Gaige asked.

“My mother. She’s thinking of the times we spent together. She knows I’m here.”

“Let’s go in.” Gaige leaned down to whisper in my ear. “Before my fingers turn blue.”

“Sorry.” I immediately eased my grip on Gaige’s hand but didn’t let go. “Blue is a pretty good color on you, though.”

“Well, thank you.” Gaige smiled, showing dimples that I hadn’t seen in a while. “Remember, they’ll love you at any age. Are you ready?”

I took a deep breath. “I’m ready.”

Gaige stepped toward the door, and it opened.

My mother, standing next to my dad and Tas as if they’d been having a conversation, turned toward the doorway. Her eyes met mine, and it was as if time stopped for the two of us. Her emotions were as anxious as mine but settled after a few seconds. She was my mom, and I was her little girl, at any age. We both felt that now. She smiled. “Come. Join us.”

Still a little nervous, I squeezed Gaige’s hand tighter. *You first.*

Gaige stepped forward with his hand outstretched to my mother. “It’s great to see you again, Tessy.”

“My sweet Gaige.” Tessy touched his cheek. “You mean more to me than a handshake.”

He smiled and hugged my mother like he was six years old again. “I missed you, Tessy.”

“And I missed you.” After a long embrace, she pulled back and cocked her head at him. “I must say, though, it’s a little strange seeing you all grown up. You are the exact image of your father at this age.” She narrowed her eyes at him, studying his face. “Maybe not *exact*. The eyes. That gorgeous blue, always so

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striking. Those are Sena's. I can't wait to see her when we get back to Anu."

My father stood slightly back, letting my mother get reacquainted with her life. A life he'd never shared, but a world he'd need to get used to now. He glanced my way, and a soft smile that reached all the way to his eyes greeted me. Gaige pulled me forward so that I was standing face to face with my mother.

My gaze went from my mother to my father and back. So many emotions flooded me—happiness, excitement, hopefulness, but a bit of sadness too, for all the time lost. My parents both had a warmth, an understanding, about them. It didn't matter how much time had passed. They saw only the future—a future where we'd be a family again. Tears started to pool in my eyes and, without thought, we gripped each other in one of our old family hugs.

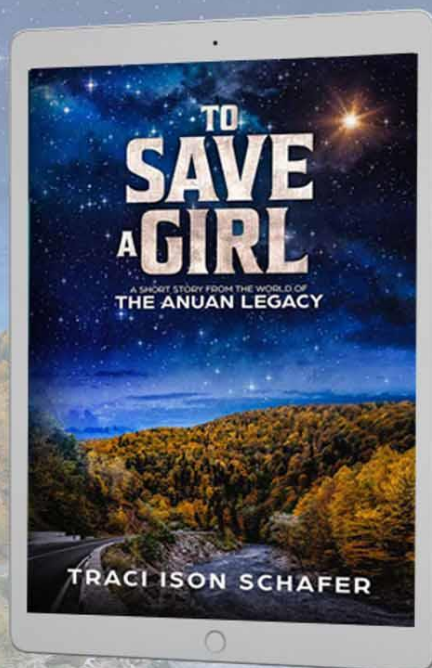
"Aww. Don't worry, baby girl." My mother smoothed my hair the way she used to all those years ago. "We'll get to know each other again."

"I'd like that," I said. "Very much."

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